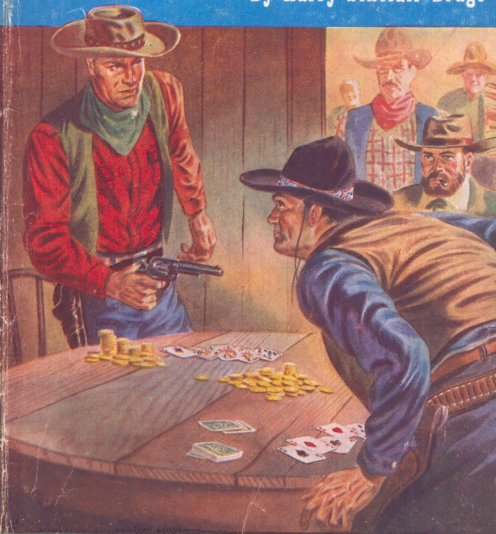


BUCKSKIN EMPIRE

By Harry Sinclair Drago



A ROBUST CHRONICLE OF THE SOUTHWEST.
COLORFUL AND CRAMMED WITH ACTION.

—NEW YORK HERALD-TRIBUNE

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ABRIDGED

BUCKSKIN EMPIRE

By
HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Abridged Edition



CENTURY PUBLICATIONS

Chicago

Published by Century Publications, 139 N. Clark St., Chicago 2, Ill.
Printed in the United States of America

This book has been condensed to increase the pace of the story, with permission of the publisher. Characters and situations in this book are fictional and any similarity to actual persons or places is purely coincidental.

CHAPTER 1

TALL, sober-faced Gideon Skene ranged ahead of his fast-traveling wagons in the pre-dawn chill. They were nine days out of La Paz and well into Kansas. It was his intention to be in Pawnee and the railhead before darkness fell again. Kiowa Smith, a grizzled, pint-size little man, rode at his side. Kiowa fancied he knew the reason for Skene's haste this morning.

"Yo're shore breakin' a gusset to git there," he said. "We better drop back a bit; we're drawin' purty far ahead. It's been a wet spring; the Kiowas like to raid this far north when there's water in the *charcos*."

Skene swung around in his saddle, measuring the distance back to the wagons by the faint rumble that reached his ears. "You're right. We'll pull up."

Where Indians were concerned, the little man was seldom wrong. From somewhere along the upper Arkansas he had been carried off as a child by a war party and raised among the Kiowas. He bore them no ill will. He had given himself the name of Smith, not having the least idea who he was.

"You know how them steam trains is," he said as they waited. "They're allus late—or later. I don't expect to see Miss Lavinia in Pawnee before tomorrow mornin'. It's shore goin' to be nice havin' her back. By Jasper, Gid, we'll have to be careful how we step, I reckon, when she begins usin' all them manners and education she's been learnin' back there in St. Louie."

Gideon recognized Kiowa's right to speak so personally. Lavinia had been only a very young girl when the little man had gone to work for her father. In the years between Jeptha Marr had prospered. His sheep and cattle in the thousands roamed the great Rancho Santa Magdalena, and his freighting business had grown so that wherever a wheel turned between La Paz and the Kansas towns it oftener than not belonged to him—the finest oxen for the heavy loads and the best Chihuahua mules for the lighter work.

Gideon had caught a faint sound. It was like wind rushing through the tall grass. But he knew it was not the wind. Not a leaf was stirring. The distant murmur swelled, receded, and was gone, and the world was still and empty again. Behind him he could hear the teams coming up.

"Ponies?" he queried.

"I dunno," the little man muttered. "Jest as well we hauled up before we rode through that plum thicket at the bottom of this draw."

It was growing lighter every second. He stood up in his stirrups and peered ahead. Down there at the bottom of the gently rolling slope nothing moved, but Kiowa did not relax his attention even when the first of the teams came abreast of him. Gideon rode back along the wagons shouting: "Bunch up! Look sharp!"

The hoarse cries of the teamsters and the cracking of whips quickly had the wagons bunched. Past the plum thicket they rolled and up the far slope.

Kiowa had a quick look at the bottoms.

"Injuns," he reported when he rejoined Gideon at the head of the train. "Fifteen to twenty of 'em. Tracks everywhere."

The sun began to lick up the mist. The country opened up, and they traveled fast for an hour. Ahead of them a thin spiral of smoke wafted up from the prairie. It put a question in the eyes of both men that remained there until they topped a slight rise. Black against the horizon stood the still smoldering remains of the Washburn and Sublette stage for Santa Fe.

A few minutes brought them to the stage. The still, huddled mounds on the ground told their own story.

"Got 'em all," Kiowa growled as he slipped out of his saddle. One horse had been killed. It lay where it had fallen. The others had been run off. The driver and his three passengers had obviously been dragged from the stage before it was fired. Gideon pointed to the driver.

"Bill Parrott."

"Yeh. . . . And Bill allus said they'd never lift his hair." The little man shook his gnarled head. "Wal, I don't suppose he figured he had to look fer anythin' like this within fifty miles of Pawnee. This was civilized country to Bill."

He picked up a blood-smeared arrow and examined the wind funneling on the shaft. "Kiowa," he pronounced. "Reckon it was the same bunch that did all that burnin' and killin' down at Streeter's Station last fall."

The wagons had come up. The skinnners got down and stood around. They were hard men, but they were touched.

"Get your shovels," Gideon told them. "We'll bury these people."

An hour later the wagons rolled over the shallow graves. Gideon spoke to Kiowa. There was a troop of cavalry stationed at old Fort Hibben, just outside of Pawnee. It was imperative that word be got there at once. The little man offered to go.

"Shore," Kiowa said. "When do you figger you'll be rollin' into Pawnee? You've lost more'n an hour here."

"I know it," Skene answered. "If the train happens to be on time we'll just about make it. After you've talked to Captain Macgruder you go into town and find out about the train. If I'm not there when it pulls in, and an escort isn't possible, you see that Miss Lavinia doesn't take the night stage. She may be hard to convince—being anxious to get home—but don't take no for an answer."

Kiowa pulled away at once. Gideon watched him until he was not even a bobbing speck in the undulating prairie. Whenever the pace of the teams slowed even momentarily he dropped back to learn the cause, shouting: "Watch your leaders, Wash!" or "Your wheelers are doing all your pulling, Slick! Straighten out!"

He cut the nooning short. By two o'clock he was scanning the horizon for sight of the blue-clad troop from Hibben. Time ran on, however, and another forty minutes passed before he saw a detail of a dozen men, guidon

whipping flat in the rising wind, dash across the shallow crossing of La Bonta Creek. To his surprise he saw that Kiowa rode with them. They were splattered with mud.

Young Lieutenant Daniels, fresh from the Point, pulled up briefly. "Captain Macgruder's respects to you, sir," he said with a formality strange to the frontier. "He says he will be pleased to provide an escort for the night stage as far as the Little Sandy."

Learning that Gideon had no information to give him that Kiowa had not already imparted, the lieutenant ordered his men to ride on.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Gideon said to the little man.

"The train's three hours late," the latter explained, "So I borrowed a hoss and came back. Macgruder says it's Kiowas all right—young Hueco. They burned out that little cow ranch on the Sweetwater yestiddy and ran off some stock. . . . You been comin' right along."

They began to find pools of water in the trails, and before long the wagons were wallowing in deep mud. The mules stood up to it, however, and an hour before sunset Pawnee was in sight, its sprawling, broken sky line dwarfed by the immensity of the prairie.

Since the early days of the trail, long before Fort Hibben was established, men had bivouacked there where crystal-clear Pawnee Creek crossed the long and little-known track to La Paz and Santa Fe. They called it the Crossing. Seven years back the financially uncertain Kansas Central Railroad had come trundling over the prairie with the knockdown stores and houses that formally had been Cimarron City, sixty miles to the east, and overnight the Crossing had become the town of Pawnee.

Some of those jerry-built houses were still there. But Pawnee was firmly on its feet, its population doubling and redoubling as it became apparent that the railroad was not going to leave it behind. From time to time the Pawnee *Enterprise* still printed stories to the effect that the Kansas Central was about to build on to Denver; another time it was swinging south for El Paso. After seven years no one took those tales seriously, for though the town was prosperous, the Kansas Central was seldom able to meet its obligations on time. It had been built on a shoestring, and its debts were many. Only the beef herds driving up from Texas and the business it garnered from the shortened trail to the Southwest kept the wheels turning. Therefore, it was with a sharp grunt of surprise that Skene saw the freshly graded roadbed that extended several miles west of town. It had not been there on his last trip east. No work was being done at the moment, but some track had been laid and equipment was piled about.

They found Pawnee's main street a sea of mud. The eleven wagons, piled high with freight, seemed to be of particular interest to the men standing around in little knots on the plank sidewalk. By the look of them they were St. Louis Irish, brought out by the Kansas Central. A dozen or more of them followed the wagons to the freight platform beside the track.

"They're spoilin' fer a fight," Kiowa muttered. "It looks like we might

have trouble with 'em."

"Their quarrel is with the railroad," Skene said. "I'm not takin' sides. Tell the boys to keep an eye open."

The men came down the platform until they were only a few feet away. There they stopped, and their spokesman, a barrel-chested man with a thatch of unruly red hair stepped up to Skene.

"Brannigan's the name," he announced. "Matt Brannigan. I'm runnin' things fer the lads. You git thim wagons away from here. There ain't no freight bein' shipped till we get our wages."

Gideon's face thinned and his wide shoulders seemed to become even wider. "Brannigan, your fight is with the railroad, not with me. I've got freight to ship, and I aim to ship it." His tone was deceptively quiet. "If the Kansas Central needs money freight is a good way to get it. You better step aside now."

"Not so fast with that step-aside stuff, me bucko," the red-haired man growled. "I'm tellin' you to git your wagons outa here. You can ship when this little matter has been settled—and not before! Am I right, lads?"

"Right!" was the booming answer.

Kiowa had sounded a shrill trail yell. It brought the bearded Missourians to the platform on the run. Their methods were unorthodox, but in a rough-and-tumble fight Gideon had seen them lick their weight in human wildcats.

"You're asking for trouble, Brannigan." His tone was tight and tense. "I'm not moving my wagons."

"Then we'll move 'em for you!" was the bullying response.

Little Kiowa saw the corners of Gideon's mouth twitch. It was a danger signal that he recognized. He expected to see him drive his whistling right into the man's jaw. Instead Skene caught Brannigan by the belt and collar, swung him high over his head, and tossed him face down into the oozing mud.

Seeing their leader manhandled in that fashion made the others hesitate. Brannigan lay where he had fallen for a minute, the wind knocked out of him. When he scrambled to his feet, dripping mud and water, he cursed them for cowards, but even his bitter tirade failed to whip his followers to action. Growling and muttering among themselves, they beat a retreat, and Brannigan went with them.

"You wait here," Gideon told them. "I'll step inside and see if the railroad can't give us some protection."

Starting down the platform toward the tiny building that housed the passenger and freight offices of the Kansas Central, he was aware of faces drawing back from the window. But though it told him that the agent was not alone, he was surprised on entering the office to find Phineas Tull, the president of the company, there, and even more surprised to see Vin Sandusky, the town marshal, occupying a chair in the corner.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Skene," Tull said, continuing to pace the floor. "Good afternoon!" He was a perpetually nervous little man with a pious-

looking face who had worried himself bald.

Gideon's attention went beyond him to Vin Sandusky, and his face was hard and flat. The marshal, grown fat and soft with easy living, shifted his legs uncomfortably.

He turned to Tull and the agent. "Well, what about it?" he demanded. "Do you want Jephtha Marr's business?"

"Of course we want it, Mr. Skene," Tull hastened to assure him. "We are delighted to have it."

"Get my wagons unloaded then," Gideon told him. "We'll give your men a hand—"

"But, Mr. Skene, I—I don't know that it would be wise to unload them."

"We couldn't put a man on that platform," the agent put in. "Brannigan's gang has got everyone scared out of their wits."

"Gid, why don't you drive out to the bed grounds with your wagons for the night?" the marshal suggested. "Tull says that Steve Bent, his general manager, is comin' in this evenin' on Number One with some cash. Things may be different in the mornin'. You'll find a Texas outfit holdin' some beef out there on the flat. They drove in this mornin', but they turned back when they saw how things was."

"Texas?" Skene took him up sharply. "Don't sound like Texas to me." He turned to the agent. "Heflin, open up the freight shed. I'll unload my wagons."

Heflin glanced questioningly at Phineas Tull.

"Oh, very well, if he insists," the latter sputtered. "But I warn you, Mr. Skene, the railroad company is not assuming any responsibility. These hoodlums have threatened to set a match to the shed."

"I'll take care of that," Skene said flatly. "You just look the other way, Vin. If there isn't any law in this town, I'll make a little of my own."

CHAPTER 2

GIDEON waited only for the agent to get the keys to the freight shed. "How much time have I got before the train from the East gets in?" he demanded as they started out.

Heflin glanced up at the clock. "An hour and twenty minutes—if she don't lose any more time."

"It'll have to do," Gideon muttered. "Get your keys."

On the platform he called his men around him.

"We've got to run this stuff into the shed ourselves. There'll be extra pay for all. Get busy now."

They turned to with a will that took no account of their weariness. Grunting under heavy loads, they hurried the baled hides and bagged wool inside. With twenty-five minutes to spare the job was finished. The men raised a shout. All that remained to be done now was to drive down the street to Link Menafee's wagon yard and turn the mules into the corral.

Pawnee was waiting for them, and they were eager for the sting of its whiskey and the excitement of its painted smiles.

"Just a word before you pull away," he said. He had already acquainted Kiowa with his plans. "I don't want to spoil any man's fun, but the threat has been made that this freight shed will be burned. Our stuff is in here on my responsibility—not the railroad's. I want two men to stand guard tonight with Kiowa. Will two of you volunteer?"

"Shucks, Gid," Wash Clemmon answered, "let us git oiled up a bit and we'll all be back."

"That won't do, Wash. Whoever stays here must have a clear head."

The big fellow muttered in his beard for a moment and then said, "Wal, yuh can count me fer one, and Slick Tibbetts will be two."

Slick didn't like it, but he said yes. "It's givin' the rest of you gophers an-awful head start," he growled, "but Wash and me will shore catch up with you before we leave Pawnee."

Their reluctance did not raise any question of their loyalty in Gideon's mind; he knew what he was asking.

"Get your blankets," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can and spell you a bit while you get supper."

"Take your time," Kiowa told him. "If we have any trouble here it won't be till well after dark. How far do we go if it comes?"

"All the way," Gideon said without a moment's hesitation. "We can't expect any help from Sandusky. If they try to rush you don't waste any time with your fists—use your guns."

"You better git along, Gid," Kiowa advised. "One of the boys will take care of yore hoss. You ain't got too much time."

"That's a fact," Skene answered. Getting his war bag out of a wagon, he tossed it over his shoulder and started across the street to the Pawnee House. Saloons and the town's leading mercantile establishments rubbed shoulders democratically in the long block that faced the railroad station.

He had fifteen minutes in which to shave and make himself presentable. From his bag he took out his best black broadcloth suit and a pair of new boots, brought all the way from Santa Fe for this occasion—the finest that old Espinosa could produce. There was a silk shirt, too, carefully placed in a little bag of its own to protect it against the dust of the trail. He laid the things out hurriedly and lathered his face. As he shaved voices swelled angrily in the next room. His interest quickened as he realized that Matt Brannigan was one of the speakers. When Gideon heard his own name mentioned he had no compunction about catching what he could of the violent harangue. That Brannigan was getting a furious dressing down was instantly apparent.

"Why didn't you sail into him with both fists?" a wrathful voice demanded. "I'm not paying you to pick yourself up out of the mud, Brannigan. This man Skene doesn't mean anything to me, but here was a chance to make things good and tough for old Tull, and you muffed it."

"When he squared off at me I thought he was goin' to fight," Brannigan

protested. "I didn't know it was tricks he was goin' to play. The dirty scut, I'll change the looks of his face fer that little business the next time we meet!"

"Save your breath," the other retorted. "I told you I've nothing against Skene. It's what he represents that interests me. What about the men? You had plenty of backing. Why didn't they do something?"

"Sure I don't know—unless Tull's story that young Bent is comin' with money to pay them off has cooled them down," was the unhappy answer. An enraged snort rewarded him.

"You fool!" the man cried. "You know it's your business to keep them worked up! This talk of them getting their wages doesn't interest me. The banks won't loan the Kansas Central another dollar. The parties I represent have seen to that."

Brannigan clumped down the stairs. Gideon was more interested in the man in the next room. He had overheard enough to convince him that the stranger's purpose was to wrest control of the railroad from Phineas Tull, not to avenge some personal grudge.

A distant train whistle hurried him out of the hotel. At the station he found the night stage drawn up. It had the promised escort, but it was limited to three men. His ire was immediately aroused.

"Did Captain Macgruder detail just the three of you to go through to the Little Sandy?" he asked.

Before more could be said the captain pushed through the mixed crowd of grumbling construction men and apprehensive townspeople. Macgruder called him aside.

"I'm sorry, Skene," the captain said, "but I've had to change my plans. When word reached me of the raid on the Sweetwater last evening I sent Lieutenant Snyder and a party out on a scout at once. I don't know when they'll be back. The same is true of Daniels. I've had no word from him. It's left me shorthanded. Even so, I expected to give the stage a sizeable escort, but an hour ago Mr. Tull and a number of businessmen called on me to take charge of Pawnee if rioting starts. I know the situation is dangerous. I've got to be prepared for it."

A long blast of the whistle set the stage for the train's arrival. Puffing and huffing importantly, it rolled up to the station and ground to a stop with a tired sigh.

There were only a dozen odd passengers. Gideon's glance traveled down the car steps, looking for Lavinia. With a tightening of the throat he saw her then, standing on the platform of the rear coach. It had been not quite two years since she had gone east. Her bright flashing smile was the same, but in that first glance he saw that there was a new sedateness in her eyes. All the pride that was in her was reflected in the way she held her head. There had been something boyish about her. It was gone. In its place there was a womanly loveliness even beyond his dreaming.

Lavinia saw him a moment later and waved a tiny handkerchief. But Gideon had taken only a step in her direction when a smiling, broad-

shouldered man, his fashionable gray beaver cocked at a rakish angle, descended the steps of the coach and turned to hand her down. As she hesitated at sight of the mud he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the platform.

It was done with a grace and flourish that awakened a hot resentment in Gideon Skene, and he was sharply aware of his awkwardness.

"Gideon!" Lavinia exclaimed in her happiness at seeing him again. "Oh, it's so good to be back!" And forgetting the decorum that she had so patiently acquired at the Misses Higby's Female Seminary, she threw her arms about him and hugged him affectionately.

"Your father wanted to be here," he told her. "Instead he was called to Santa Fe on business. His health is good."

The young man who had helped her off the train had been left standing there, but though he had been momentarily forgotten he had not lost his impudent grin and self-confident air.

"I'm sorry," she exclaimed. "Gideon—this is Stephen Bent. He's connected with the railroad. He's been very kind."

The two men acknowledged the introduction with a cool nod, their eyes meeting in cold, critical appraisal. It was as though each recognized that they were already rivals.

"I heard you were expected," Skene said, his lips a little tighter than usual. "Tull will certainly be relieved to know that you are here. And thank you for your courtesy, Bent."

The latter realized that he was being dismissed, but he was equal to the occasion. "Don't waste any sympathy on us, Skene. Things never looked better for the Kansas Central." Lifting his hat, he bowed to Lavinia. "I'll bid you good-by, Miss Marr, and wish you a safe journey home. I'll look forward to seeing you again."

"Yes, Mr. Bent," she murmured. "If you should ever find yourself in La Paz—"

She was amazed to hear him say, "I expect to be in La Paz in a few weeks on business of a very important nature."

"Railroad business?" Skene questioned with edged sarcasm.

"I have no other," was the blunt response.

CHAPTER 3

LAVINIA'S GLANCE followed him as he made his way into the station. The fact did not escape Gideon. When she turned to him her eyes were reproving.

"That was unkind, Gideon," she said. "Why did you say it?"

"I don't know anything about Stephen Bent," Skene said flatly. "He's been connected with the Kansas Central only a few months. Tull, I know. It was my original intention to line up with them, but after hearing Bent say that he expects to be in La Paz in a few weeks on railroad business I'm

not so sure that's the thing to do. But I shouldn't be bothering you with such things. If you will let me have the checks for your baggage—"

"Wait," she said. "What's the meaning of this, Gideon?" She had seen the cavalrymen drawn up beside the stage. Her question was perfunctory, and she answered it herself. "There's trouble here in La Paz."

"You won't be held up very long," he said, wondering a little at the readiness with which she gave in. Bent's presence in Pawnee suggested a reason that he did not want to recognize. "We'll be heading back to La Paz day after tomorrow. If necessary you can go with us. I'll see you to the hotel now."

Gideon was abruptly aware that Matt Brannigan and half a dozen of his men were watching from in front of the saloon next door.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bent crossing the street. Brannigan had been waiting here for him. He stepped forward now, his men at his heels.

"Hello, Brannigan!" Bent said with a crooked grin that completely ignored the fact that anything was amiss. "I hear you've been amusing yourself by scaring old men. Shame on you, Matt!"

"Hold off a minute there!" Brannigan burst out. "It ain't your fancy lip we're wantin' to hear. What we want to know, Bent, is—do we git our wages?"

"There's never been any question about it," was the ready answer. "We start paying off in the morning."

The men were surprised and relieved.

"Wait a minit!" Brannigan growled. "I don't like the sound of that startin'-to-pay-off business. Are you meanin' to give us tin per cent or the likes and leave us here whistlin' fer the rest of what's due us? Or do we get paid in full?"

Bent knew that Lavinia and Skene were hearing every word. It didn't prevent him from giving his full attention to Brannigan. "Every man gets a week's wages," he said. "You'll have to wait for the rest—but you'll get it within thirty days. There's two years' steady work ahead of you on the Kansas Central if you'll listen to me."

"It ain't work we want!" the red-haired one roared. "We ain't takin' no more promises, Bent! Some of us have waited three weeks for our money now—and we want it, in full! We'll git it or we'll start takin' it out of yer hide!"

He had picked his men for this occasion. They were there to fight.

"Let him have it!" one cried.

Bent whipped off his coat and hat and tossed them on the hotel porch. "Come on," he invited. Head lowered, he sailed into them, driving his fists like pistons.

"This is no place for you, Lavinia," Skene said. "Please go into the hotel!"

"No," she replied stoutly. "I've seen men fight, but never seven against one." She winced as Brannigan caught Bent under the jaw and lifted him

to his toes. "They'll kill him, Gideon!"

Skene's eyes were inscrutable. He saw Bent go down and quickly get to his feet. It seemed to settle the question in his mind. "Here," he said, handing her his hat. His coat followed. In another second he was in the thick of the fight. A hard fist crashed into his mouth and split his lip.

The salty taste of his own blood on his tongue whipped up the last ounce of fighting fury in him, and he was no longer just the good Samaritan. Picking his target, his whistling right found its mark and permanently reduced the odds against them by one. Only now did Bent realize that Gideon had stepped into this fight with him. He blinked his surprise, and when their eyes met he grinned. "What are you doing in this?" he demanded.

"I didn't like the odds!" Skene flung back, the words cut short by Brannigan's huge fist. Before the redheaded one could follow up, Gideon knocked him off balance. But Brannigan came back, and they stood there slugging it out toe to toe.

Matt tired of that, and when he tried to bring up his knee to drive it into Gideon's stomach the latter stepped back and let him have it on the chin. Brannigan folded up as though he had been kicked by a mule. As he fell he tried to drag Bent down with him. Steve brushed him off and continued to bore in, taking a merciless beating and giving even better in exchange.

Men had gone down, but there were newcomers. Skene began to wonder how it was to end when a shrill: "Catch up! Catch up!" sounded. He knew that war cry. Familiar bearded faces appeared. It didn't take long after that. Suddenly the fight was over and Brannigan's crowd moved away. Bent and Skene turned to face each other. Something ran between them as they stood there, and when Bent put out his hand Gideon took it.

"That's a mean right you've got," Bent muttered with puffed lips.

Gideon just looked at him. "You're a cocky guy, aren't you?" he said in his tight-lipped way. "Wading into seven of them."

"I'm always ready to take a chance." Steve grinned. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

They found Lavinia on the hotel porch, her young face pale against the midnight blackness of her hair.

"I'm sorry you had to witness this brawl," Bent said. "We must be a sight."

"Nothing to be sorry about," she replied, the color coming back to her cheeks. "I enjoyed it—especially the way it ended. But you do look a bit battered—both of you. Do you suppose this will clear the air—or will there be further trouble?"

"There shouldn't be," Gideon told her. "If you'll excuse us I'll take Bent upstairs and we'll get patched up. The hotel will let you have the room your father always uses. It's the best in the house—"

Lavinia went to the desk, and he and Skene climbed the stairs.

As they reached the second floor a man stepped out of the room next to Skene's. That it was he who had Matt Brannigan in his secret employ

seemed obvious. Gideon eyed him with interest as he came down the hall. The stranger was a stocky man with the skin drawn drum tight on his face. It came as a complete surprise to have Bent hail him.

"Hello, Clanton," Steve said suspiciously. "I didn't expect to find you in Pawnee. What are you doing out here?"

"Just looking over a little proposition." Clanton laughed at his deliberate vagueness. "By the looks of you, you haven't changed your ways," he observed thinly.

"Stop it," Bent whipped back, "I've got your number, Champ. The Kansas Central is the only proposition out here that would interest you."

"You never can tell," Clanton observed carelessly. He would have gone on to the stairs, but Bent stepped up to him and blocked the way. "Listen, Champ, I'm beginning to understand a lot of things," he said harshly. "The K.C. is my dish. You keep your spoon out of it. Is that plain enough?"

Clanton's eyes narrowed. "I play my cards the way I see them, Steve. You do the same."

Bent let him go without saying anything further.

"An old friend of yours?" Gideon queried as they stepped into his room.

"He's a railroad promoter," Bent replied. "We used to be in business together. He's the answer to the trouble we've been having."

"So I gathered. He had Brannigan up here just before the train pulled in. Through these walls you can hear a man thinking. Clanton is out to make things so tough for you that you can't go on, Bent. He claims he's got things fixed so you can't raise another dollar."

"So that's it!" Bent ground out savagely. "I knew I was getting the run-around in St. Louis. But I'm one jump ahead of them, Skene! Clanton will find out in a week or two. In the meantime I'll give him all the fight he wants." He laughed as he caught his reflection in the mirror. "By the way, Skene, what's your setup with Jeptha Marr? Are you his partner?"

"No, I'm just working for him," Gideon answered, surveying the damage to his broadcloth. "I've got my own freighting outfit—four or five hundred mules—and we take the army contracts on shares. What makes you ask?"

"I was just thinking. I've got big things ahead of me. I may have something interesting to say to you one of these days."

Gideon flicked a glance at him, and the light in his blue eyes flowed cold. "If that means La Paz and the Territory—don't count on it. You've got one fight on your hands here, Bent. If you point your nose in our direction you'll have another."

CHAPTER 4

THE PRAIRIE NIGHT fell swiftly.

"If you're going to eat we'll have supper together," Bent suggested. Gideon had expected to wait for Lavinia to come down, and he was not

inclined to share her company with Bent. To his dismay, they saw that she was already in the dining room. Little Phineas Tull sat at a table by himself. They were the only diners.

Steve grinned, leading the way to Lavinia's table.

As Gideon expected, Bent carried the conversation. He was a glib talker and he managed to make himself interesting even to Skene. But much of what he had to say, especially about St. Louis, was meant only for Lavinia, and Gideon was secretly pleased when the meal was over.

Pawnee seemed to take on new life by night. Light streamed from its saloons and honky-tonks, and there was a note of drunken revelry on the still air. Storekeepers had put up their wooden shutters, however, early as the hour was, and in the simple act there was a tacit expectation of trouble to come. If Captain Macgruder was holding his troopers in readiness they were not in sight.

Gideon went on to the freight shed. Kiowa and the others saw him coming. They knew all about the fight.

"I never expected to hear of you wadin' in to save the skin of one of these railroad bigwigs," Kiowa declared crustily. "I wouldn't trust the best of 'em!"

Skene smiled, but he would not have dismissed the sally so lightly if he had been aware of what was transpiring between Bent and Phineas Tull. The little man was pacing the floor as usual, his face furrowed with his worries. "I can't give you an answer!" he said for the fourth time. "I must think this over."

"That won't do, Phineas," Bent said immovably. "You've got to make up your mind now. Things as big as this don't wait."

"I know—I know," Tull protested. "You're a smart boy, Steve. It isn't that I mind meeting your demands. But what you are suggesting is the basest sort of bribery—it's criminal collusion! If we're caught we'll go to prison, both of us!"

"Nonsense," Bent snapped, his patience wearing thin. "I've built and promoted railroads. So have you. You know that not a mile of track was ever laid that some politician didn't have his finger in the pie. Truman and Sellars can jam this legislation through. Naturally they want to be taken care of. It's taken me weeks to get this thing set. . . . State subsidy of twelve thousand dollars a mile—land grants—and a year to reach the New Mexican line! What more could you want? And yet you hesitate. Maybe I can tell you something that will help you to make up your mind. Did you know that Champ Clanton is here in Pawnee?"

"Clanton? Why, no," Tull's lined face was suddenly pasty in the lamp-light. "What's he doing here?"

"Well, he isn't here for his health," Bent said flatly. "He knows what's on the fire. He's here representing some St. Louis bank. That's why they shut down on us."

"Oh my, that's terrible!" Tull protested. "I've always tried to be an honorable man. Such methods—"

"It will be worse than terrible if Clanton can throw us into bankruptcy," Bent broke in. "He'll be all set if he can pick up the road for a song. And that's his game. He's behind all the trouble we're having here."

The little man licked his dry lips. "You're right," he gasped. "You're right, Steve." He stopped pacing to shoot an appealing glance at Bent. "How much stock do Senator Sellars and Truman want?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars worth—"

"They wouldn't take less?"

"I wouldn't offer them less," Steve said hotly. "You can't be small with big men." In his impatience he got to his feet and began pacing the floor as excitedly as Tull. "You never had big ideas, Phineas. You've got to have outlook if you want to get ahead today. When we get going we won't stop at the state line. I can see California—the Pacific Ocean! Kansas Central!" he scoffed. "Why, that ain't big enough. The Kansas Central and Pacific—that's what we need. Something big! We'll have the charter amended. I'll sell stock enough in this road to gold-plate it for you!"

In the end little Mr. Tull heaved a heavy sigh of resignation. "All right, Steve," he said timidly, "I'll do it. You see Truman and Sellars. As soon as I can get back to Kansas City I'll have stock made out in equal amounts to the three of you."

Bent slapped him on the back. "Now you're talking, Phineas! It'll take two or three weeks. The Railroad Act will demand that forty miles of construction be completed before any money is payable. But that'll be all right. As soon as the bill is passed we can float some bonds—even if we have to do it at a discount."

"Two or three weeks"—the little man shook his head—"I suppose it will take that long. I—I hadn't thought of that. What am I to do in the meantime, my boy? Money is the only thing that will satisfy this howling mob. You don't seem to realize that my life is in danger. They may try to hang me."

"Keep your chin up," Bent told him. "I'll look out for you. If we have a riot here we'll get martial law in a hurry. Those things are easy when you're associated with big men like Truman and Sellars."

"But what about tonight? If they start destroying railroad property—" Tull wiped his perspiring face nervously. "You know that Clanton is unscrupulous."

His private car stood on a siding a few yards away from the station, shades drawn. When he had gathered up his papers Bent walked over with him. An old Negro opened the door.

"Did you get my bag, Gus?" Bent asked.

"Yas suh! It's in your room, Mistuh Bent. Right this way."

Bent got a pistol out of the bag and slipped it into his pocket. He sat around then, talking to Tull for the better part of an hour. Phineas laced and unlaced his nervous fingers a thousand times. He had something on his mind and after several timid attempts at it finally put it into words. "This is going to be a long job, Steve. It will mean buckling down for a year or

two with work and more work. There won't be any time for play, my boy. You—er—realize it, I trust."

Bent laughed heartily. "You mean Rita Molyneaux? You don't have to worry about hurting my feelings. That's all over, Phineas! Through!"

Mr. Tull sighed his relief. "I'm glad to hear you say it," he murmured. "Not that she isn't a fascinating creature. I've often enjoyed her performances. But I'm afraid she wouldn't be of any—er—assistance to you in this undertaking."

"Hardly," Bent agreed with a broad smile. "You can dismiss it from your mind. From what I hear, she expects to marry into the Sansome family."

"Eli Sansome's family?" the little man demanded incredulously. "She proposes to marry young Wick?"

"That seems to be the idea."

Phineas shook his head. "I'm afraid Mr. Eli will have something to say about that—not meaning any disrespect to Miss Molyneaux, you understand."

"I think I know exactly what you mean," Steve said pointedly. "It doesn't mean anything to me; I wish her luck. Don't get the idea that this had anything to do with Sansome's bank turning us down."

On the way out he spoke to the old Negro. "You keep the door locked, Gus. Don't let anyone in. And keep the curtains down."

The rear platform of the car was in darkness. Standing there to accustom his eyes to the blackness of the night, Bent's mouth fell into grim lines.

The station loomed ahead of him, outlined by the town lights beyond. When he was within fifty yards of the building he saw a man edge past the corner of it and hurry across the tracks. He was followed by another and another until Steve lost count of them.

"They're going after the freight shed," he told himself. "Skene will have his hands full with that bunch."

Slithering around in the mud, he made his way back to the tracks and started for the shed on the run. "Skene, are you there?" he called. "This is Bent!"

"Yes!" Gideon answered. "What is it?"

"You're in for it," Bent told him as he stepped on the platform. "There are thirty or more of them out there on the flats. They crossed the tracks a few minutes ago. They're moving down this way. If it's just the same to you, I'll stick here."

"Have you got a gun?"

"Yeh."

"All right," Skene said. "You may have to use it. I don't intend to argue with these fellows. I've got my men posted around the back. You stay here while I pass the word to them. If this mob comes at you fire over their heads. If that warning doesn't stop them let them have it."

Turning the corner, he made his way back to where Kiowa stood guard. "They're coming," he told him. "Bent just showed up with the word. He

says there's thirty or more."

The sharp flat crack of a gun from the rear, where Slick waited, cut off whatever Kiowa had been about to say. That first shot was followed by a second and a third, and both men knew that they didn't come from the same source. Suddenly three or four guns were speaking at once.

"Come on!" Skene cried. "They're armed!"

The firing ceased abruptly as they ran down the side of the building. In its place came the enraged roar of the mob. Through the darkness Skene and Kiowa saw them sweep forward, brandishing pick handles and guns.

"What are we waitin' fer?" Kiowa cried. "They'll be clubbin' our brains out in another minit!" His gun cut a red streak through the night. A yell of pain rewarded him, and he snapped a second shot. The men broke, and a slug from Gideon's gun put them to full flight. "Slick!" he called. "Where are you?"

"He's here!" a snarling voice answered. It was big Wash. "The dirty scuts got him, Gid! I can't git a flicker out of him!"

"Keep your eyes peeled, Kiowa," Skene warned as he dropped to his knees and made a brief examination.

Bent joined them in time to hear him say, "He's still alive. Got him just above the heart.

"Let me have him," Bent said. "I'll carry him inside."

Before Bent could get Slick over his shoulder a howl of glee arose from the mob, now at the front of the shed. Suddenly the night was lurid with leaping flames.

Skene ran that way with Kiowa at his heels. A pile of oil-soaked rags had been placed against the door. Already the tinder-dry wood was blazing. The widening circle of light revealed Matt Brannigan and his forces running to cover.

"I'll give you a bellyful of this!" little Kiowa screeched, his gun buckling. He dropped Brannigan with the first shot. But Matt got up and flung himself into a protecting ditch. The man at his side wasn't so lucky. A wild whoop of satisfaction poured out of Kiowa.

"Give me a hand here!" Skene yelled, kicking the burning rags away from the door. "In another minute it will be too late!"

CHAPTER 5

A BARREL OF WATER and two battered buckets were all they had to depend on to save the shed. It was quickly apparent to Skene that the fire was getting beyond them.

"Douse the walls with your bucket!" he shouted to Kiowa. Wetting a rag, he wrapped it around his hands and ran the door back off its rollers and let it fall on the platform, where it continued to burn.

Bent carried Slick inside and hurried out to give them a hand. Between the three of them they extinguished the fire before it reached the roof.

With their last pailful of water Kiowa snuffed out the blaze on the platform.

"How is that man in there?" Skene asked Bent.

Steve shook his head.

"We'll have to get a doctor over in a hurry."

"It's too late, Skene. He's gone."

Gideon's mouth tightened grimly. "I was afraid of that."

"By Jasper, I done a little settlin' up fer Slick," Kiowa ground out. "I aim to do a heap more before this night's over. Did you leave Wash out behind?"

"Yeh."

"I'll git back with him," the little man growled. "The two of you stay here. We can handle our end."

"Slick Tibbetts was a good man," Skene said as he and Bent waited for the attack to be renewed. "I suppose some of the dupes in this mob are good men too. It all can be charged up to your friend Clanton."

"I'm sorry you got in the way of all this," Bent said. "It's just the old story of the innocent bystander getting his ears knocked down. You don't mean a thing to Clanton. You don't figure in his game at all. That's the tough part of it. If—Look at that! They've set the station afire!"

Down the street someone was using a sledge on the wagon tire that served as Pawnee's alarm. Above the cries and confusion came the clear notes of a bugle. The crowd scattered as Captain Macgruder and his troopers charged down the street at a full gallop. Swinging around the burning station, they bore down on the fleeing mob. One or two got away, but Gideon saw that the rest were being rounded up in summary fashion.

Skene wasn't concerned about the fate of the station. Men had been killed here tonight. He didn't expect any repercussions from the law, but he appreciated that Macgruder could hold him up in Pawnee for three or four days. When he saw the captain riding up he was not surprised.

"Skene," Macgruder announced from his saddle, "I'm taking charge of Pawnee. In the morning I will officially declare the town under martial law. What's the situation here?"

"One of my men was killed. I don't know how many the other side lost."

"Damned shame!" Macgruder ripped out. "I couldn't move until I saw that Sandusky absolutely refused to do his duty. There's been rioting in the saloons for two hours. Some of your mule skinnners just about wrecked the Nonpareil when some of this construction gang tried to tangle with them. You'll have to hold them down, Skene, or in the clink they go. When are you figuring on pulling out of town?"

"Early day after tomorrow morning. Is there any question about it?"

"Not in my mind," Macgruder said. "In the absence of all law a man has the God-given right to protect himself and his goods the best way he can. One man alone is responsible for this rioting. I'll arrest him on sight. Now if you'll show me where the shooting occurred I'll have my men look after the dead or wounded."

When Skene finally got away he went to the hotel. It was after midnight when he stepped into the lobby. To his surprise he found Lavinia sitting there, bundled up in her coat.

"Gideon," she cried, "I thought you never would come. Are you all right?"

"Why, yes. You shouldn't have waited like this."

"And Mr. Bent?" she asked.

"Yes," he murmured, stung by the knowledge that her anxiety for Stephen Bent was as great as her concern for himself.

"I'm so relieved," She sighed. "I was told that you lost one of your men."

"Yes. Slick Tibbetts. You look tired, Lavinia. Why don't you go upstairs?"

"I must," she admitted. "It's been like a horrible nightmare—the shooting and the fire and the brawling in the saloons."

They were still talking when Macgruder hurried in with several of his men. He went to the desk. "What room is Clanton in?" he asked with unusual brusqueness.

"Sixteen, Captain."

Macgruder turned to his troopers. "Fetch him down," he ordered. "If he won't come willingly, use force."

Lavinia had risen. She gave Gideon an anxious glance. "What is the meaning of this?" she asked him. "Mr. Clanton had nothing to do with this rioting. He sat here keeping me company for hours."

Skene did not bother to hide his amazement. "You are acquainted with him?"

"He introduced himself," Lavinia explained.

The troopers hurried down from above to report that they could not find Clanton.

"Search the town for him," Macgruder ordered. "I want that man found!"

Skene's eyes met hers the moment they were alone. "When did you see Clanton last?"

"He said good night to me thirty minutes ago."

"Did he go up the stairs?"

"I thought so. He may have gone out the back way. I—Gideon, something is troubling you. What is it?"

"I don't want to alarm you," Gideon protested, "but a thought just leaped at me, and I can't get it out of my mind. I don't believe that Clanton is hiding out because he fears arrest. If he slipped out the back way he had something in mind. Suppose you go up to bed now. I'm going to walk over to Tull's private car and see if Bent is all right."

"All right?" Lavinia picked him up anxiously. "Have you any reason to suppose that he isn't?"

"No. But if I were Clanton and I wanted to grab this railroad I wouldn't waste any time having stations burned down and the like—unless it was leading up to something more important; I'd go after the man who stood

in my way. In this case it happens to be Steve Bent."

They said good night at the head of the stairs, and Skene went to his room. He had not bothered to lock the door. Pushing it back, he stepped in, only to freeze in his tracks, some sixth sense warning him that he was not alone.

"Come in—and close the door," came a bland invitation as he stared through the darkness. Gideon recognized the voice, and he could not swallow his surprise.

"What are you doing in here, Clanton?" he demanded, his blood running cold.

"Waiting for you, Skene." Clanton chuckled. "Just leave your gun where it is."

CHAPTER 6

Skene stood there, not a muscle moving.

"Light the lamp," Champ told him. "You'll find some matches there on the dresser. If you're wondering why I'm here I'll tell you. I just want to have a little private talk with you, Skene. I figure there's some facts you ought to know."

"I've got my facts pretty straight," Gideon grated. "I don't believe you can improve on them. If you want a light, strike it."

"All right, I will," Clanton said easily. "I meant this to be a friendly visit."

He scratched a match on the bedstead and found the lamp. His face was round and unperturbed in the yellow light. "Sit down," he said.

"Get to your point," Skene muttered. He had not made any move to sit down.

Clanton chuckled and his buttonish eyes were inscrutable. "The Kansas Central has never made a dime. Its rolling stock is worn out; it was second-hand when Tull put it on the road. And yet a few weeks ago, knowing there isn't a dollar in the treasury, a bright guy like Steve Bent gets himself made general manager. Now he's ready to sell his soul to hang onto the company, and I'm ready to go twice as far to get it away from him. There must be a reason, Skene." He shrugged callously. "Maybe I'm talking for nothing. Maybe Steve told you."

Clanton shook his head with faint annoyance. He was suddenly done with all this indirection. "Skene, there's a bill being pushed through the legislature on the quiet to guarantee the building of a railroad to the western limits of this state. It carries a big cash subsidy and a land grant of four thousand acres per mile. And whether Bent builds it or I do, that railroad is going to head straight for La Paz and on down into the Territory."

Gideon took the news stoically. "Is this your work?"

"No, I'm not that smart," Clanton murmured. "Bent arranged it, with the help of boodling politicians, and the nice little joker in this bill is that

the road has to be completed to the line within one year. It can't be done, starting from scratch. The Kansas Central is the only road that can make it. . . . Maybe you commence to savvy the why and wherefore of a few things."

Skene regarded him with his cold blue eyes. "Why are you telling me all this? By your own word, you're a crook. We haven't anything in common, Clanton."

"There's some strings to the windfall that Bent thinks he's already got in the bag. The railroad won't get title to the land until the job is done, nor more than forty percent of what the state is to pay. In fact, there won't be a cent coming in until forty miles of new construction is finished. They can't borrow money in the East. So Bent will head for the Southwest, and Jephtha Marr will be the first man he sees."

"He'll be wasting his time," Skene said, anger boiling up in him.

Clanton chose to ignore that warning. "You don't know Steve Bent. He overlooks no bets. He'll have an ambassador pleading his case in La Paz—a very lovely ambassador. You're a man; you've seen how it goes."

Skene's tight-lipped fury overflowed. "Get out of here!" he rapped. His forward lunge brought him up to Clanton. The latter got to his feet, and there was neither fear nor surprise on his round face. At the door Clanton said, "I call a spade a spade."

Skene was up early the following morning. Glancing across the way, he saw Bent supervising the putting up of one of the railroad's knockdown shacks for use as a temporary station and office. There had been a break in Brannigan's ranks. At least a score of men were already in line, waiting to get their pay. The morning train for the East stood waiting, but Tull's private car was not attached to it.

Gideon had Slick's body removed to the undertaking parlor before he proceeded to round up his skimmers and dispatch his wagons to Greer and Whelan's wholesale warehouse to load coffee, sugar, and cotton goods, all destined for La Paz and Capistrano. Loading for that long haul required care. He knew the afternoon would be well along before the job was finished.

"Martial law," little Kiowa told him when he arrived from having his breakfast. "Macgruder is putting up the notices."

A cavalryman appeared a few minutes later with word that the captain was holding an investigation at one o'clock. Skene's presence was requested.

On his way up the street he saw that Macgruder had established headquarters in a vacant store. The captain called him in.

"Lieutenant Daniels returned with his detachment a few moments ago," Macgruder said. "He ran smack dab into young Hueco in the Sand Hills just after sunset last evening. The Indians made a running fight of it, and only a few got away. That puts an end to this raid, but I'll send an escort with the stage tonight just to be sure. I told Miss Marr it would be safe to leave."

CHAPTER 7

THROUGH the dining-room window Skene could see men and women gathering for the hearing. When he arrived with Lavinia at the store building in which Captain Macgruder had set up his headquarters it was to find every chair occupied. Bent was present with Mr. Tull; Matt Brannigan sat in the front row, not far from Champ Clanton, the latter appearing quite undisturbed by the fact that he was here to be accused. He had a Pawnee lawyer with him, and after a whispered conversation with him Clanton sat back, apparently satisfied with the situation. Vin Sandusky, the town marshal, sidled in as Macgruder rapped for order.

"I won't keep you here long," the captain began. "It isn't necessary for me to recount what happened last night. My only purpose is to fix the responsibility.

"Turn your fire on me," Bent broke in. "I'll give you all the facts you need. I know Clanton is here representing a syndicate that is out to get control of the road. I can prove that he hired Matt Brannigan to work the men up to what they did last night."

"Suppose you give us your proof," Clanton's lawyer invited.

Bent turned to Brannigan. "Matt, isn't it true that you've been taking money from Clanton?"

"Sure it's true," the red-haired man roared. "What I was gettin' from the company wasn't puttin' no grub in me stomach. But Mr. Clanton, rememberin' whin I worked fer the two of you, came through like a gentleman. But there was no strings attached to it, Bent."

"You're lying," Steve cried as Macgruder rapped for order.

"Mr. Bent," the attorney cut in, "I think it is worth noting that you and my client were once business partners—associates. Yet you are here accusing him of being a scoundrel. Am I to understand that this is just a case of the kettle calling the pot black?"

Bent flushed angrily as the crowd held its breath. "Don't try to smear me with your smooth tongue," he burst out hotly. "Captain," he said to Macgruder, "if you'll ask Gideon Skene to repeat the conversation he overheard between Clanton and Brannigan you'll have all the proof you need."

The crowd sat tense, all eyes on Skene. Lavinia felt the pulse in her neck flutter as Gideon stood up.

"Well, Skene, what have you to say?" Macgruder asked.

"Nothing," was the flat deliberate answer.

"You mean you didn't overhear these men talking?" the captain demanded.

"I overheard them speaking. I can't recall what they said."

Bent leaped to his feet, his face livid. "You repeated that talk to me," he cried. "Why do you deny it now? What rotten game are you playing?"

A distance of only nine feet separated them. Gideon covered it in three steps.

"Bent, my game isn't half as rotten as yours. If I heard anything or repeated it to you I don't remember it. You were free with the word liar a minute ago. Why don't you use it now?"

"I will!" Bent growled. "You're a liar, and you know it!"

Skene saw the blow coming. He drove it up over his head, and his own fist crashed into Bent's mouth with force enough to send him staggering back into the row of spectators, upsetting them in their chairs.

Bent returned to the attack with both fists flying. Breaking through Gideon's guard, he rocked him with a solid, bone-crunching smash before Macgruder's troopers rushed in to tear them apart. They broke away from the cavalymen and lunged at each other again.

The room was in an uproar, and Macgruder pounded on the table until knuckles were raw before he got a semblance of order.

"I should have the pair of you sent to jail for this demonstration," he thundered. "I've known you a long time, Skene. I didn't expect such conduct from you."

"I'm sorry," Gideon murmured. "I meant no disrespect to you, Captain."

"What about this conversation that you were said to have overheard?" the officer asked. "I got it secondhand from Bent, but it seemed to be definite enough. Do you repeat that you can't recall it?"

"I don't remember," Gideon said, his face a stony mask.

Macgruder threw up his hands disgustedly. "I guess that settles it. It was not the only piece of evidence I hoped to produce, but it certainly was the most important. Without it, I haven't any case." He turned to Clanton. "You're free to go."

On reaching the street Gideon saw that Tull's car had been attached to the freight train that was now loading at the platform. He stepped over and got the receipts for his goods from Heflin. The agent supplied the information that Tull and Bent were going east that evening.

"Too bad Clanton isn't going with them," Skene muttered as he headed toward the warehouse.

He found his wagons almost loaded. He knew from something in the glance his men gave him that they had heard of his encounter with Bent. They said nothing—not even Kiowa—and it made Skene wonder how much more they knew.

When the work was done the men drove the wagons to Menafec's yard and turned the mules into the corral, after which they walked with Gideon to the undertaker's. Lavinia was there, her face as pale as ivory. The men appreciated her presence. They stood around, hats in their hands, wanting to express their respect for Slick but having no words with which to do it. After a brief service they rode to the cemetery at the edge of town in the buggies which the undertaker supplied.

On reaching the hotel they were informed by the clerk that the evening train was only a few minutes late today. Lavinia was ready by the time the stage rumbled up to the door. Lieutenant Daniels rode with the escort. He swung down from his horse, very young and handsome in his long belted

coat with its twin rows of brass buttons. Gideon gave him a friendly greeting. Daniels' glance had gone to Lavinia. He whipped off his campaign hat and stood waiting to be introduced.

"This is Lieutenant Daniels," Skene said. "Miss Marr."

"Lieutenant William Daniels." The young man smiled. "Some people call me Spooky, and I don't mind very much."

Lavinia found him very good to look at, with his dark curly hair tumbling about his face. "Are you riding with us, Lieutenant?"

"No—unfortunately," Daniels complained. "I'm sure you'll have no trouble. We gave Hueco a good shellacking, thanks to the haste with which Mr. Skene got word to us."

"Yeh." Daniels smiled. "Waited three months for it. I may have a little better luck soon. I'm being transferred to Fort Logan, down in your country, the first of next month."

The incoming train whistled, and the driver of the stage cracked his whip over his horses. The lieutenant said a hurried farewell.

Lavinia returned his smile. "Until I see you in La Paz," she said as the stage began to move away.

Gideon rode across to the railhead with her. Stepping out on the platform, he had only to turn his back for a moment to find Bent standing with his head through the open window of the stage, his whole attention centered on Lavinia. He ground his boot heel into Steve's foot; but the latter refused to give way.

The train pulled in several minutes later. There were passengers for the West: a whiskey drummer, squat Beltran Chavez, Capistrano's leading merchant, and an army contractor. The driver cried out a warning. "All aboard!" and climbed up on the box.

Bent took Lavinia's hand and held it tightly pressed. "Good-by," he said, and he was not grinning.

"Good-by, Stephen," Lavinia whispered. Skene thought her eyes were beginning to mist. She turned to him then. Pulling his head down, she kissed his cheek. "Good-by, Gideon. Hurry home!"

CHAPTER 8

GAILLATIN, Powell, the Lower Crossing, Grande Saline, and on across the line to Ragtown, Spanish Flats, Apache Wells—Skene knew them as well as the sisters knew their beads in the nunnery at Santa Fe. It was his way to clip off the hours, sparing neither mules, men, nor himself. But there was an urgency in him on this westward trip that ran ahead of any pace he could set.

The following morning when the trail began to lift through the mountains he eyed the grades with a new interest. He knew that engineers would find them no barrier.

His spirits rose at sight of La Paz and the knowledge that Lavinia was

there. The old familiar town smiled its usual welcome, and as he rode past Jephtha Marr's hide-and-wool warehouse a dozen men came to the wide doors and called a friendly greeting in their soft Spanish. It was echoed from the corrals and great wagon yard across the way.

In another block they were beyond the humble jacals and into the main street of La Paz, with its shops and churches of oven-baked adobe. Under the board awnings the windows of the stores were deep and barred—a relic of the old days when the raiding Apaches made life hazardous. But the building that housed Jephtha Marr's bank and offices dominated the street.

On the rise of ground, close to the river, had stood the original buildings of the Rancho Santa Magdalena. Some of them were still there, hidden by encircling cottonwoods and the great, rambling house of hewn stone that men called Marr's Castle. From its wide portico a wagon train from the East could be seen approaching for several miles. Knowing that his coming could not have gone unnoticed, Gideon left it to Kiowa to take the wagons to the freight house and turned his horse into the rail in front of the bank, hoping that Lavinia had come down to welcome him home. He was not disappointed, for as he swung out of his saddle she came to the door and waved.

Skene drank in her warm smile. He could see that in the two days that she had been back she had made herself at home. Against this familiar background he found her more desirable than ever. After they had exchanged a greeting Lavinia said, "You made a very fast trip."

"I was anxious to be here," he acknowledged. "I suppose your father is waiting to see me."

"He's inside. He'll want to see you at once. . . . You'll have dinner with us this evening, Gideon?"

"I'd be pleased." This had been the pleasant way of life in the past, and for a moment he almost forgot that it might not long be so.

Jephtha Marr swung around in his heavy chair as he heard the door open. "Gideon!" In that single word he gave complete expression to his fondness and respect for the tall sandy-haired man.

He was a massive, unsmiling man with a pair of eyes that looked out from under shaggy brows. His beard and mustache, still untouched with gray, were closely cropped, and they did not hide the strength of mouth and jaw.

"I'm happy to see you back," he said, shaking Skene's hand vigorously. "I suppose you've seen Vinia already."

"Just now," Gideon replied. "Has she acquainted you with what happened in Pawnee?"

"Yes, but I want the story from you."

"I'd better skip most of it," Gideon told him. "I have news so important that the rest doesn't matter. The thing we've feared for seven years has happened. The Kansas legislature is passing a bill guaranteeing land and cash grants for the building of a railroad to the western limits of the state."

This was the worst of his news, and Jephtha Marr seemed to lean forward as though to brace himself against it, and watching him, Gideon was re-

mined of a timber-line cedar baring its head to the blast, undaunted. Marr's eyes, always a searching gray, seemed to throw off sparks.

"Kansas can't afford it," the big man said in his driving, tightly packed voice. "Someone is feathering his nest at the people's expense—bonds—taxes! They propose to follow the old trail, of course." He shook his head at some secret thought. "That means La Paz—Santa Fe; they won't stop at the line." His unyielding gray eyes began to burn as with a fever. "They'll have to reckon with me. I know how to fight fire with fire."

At his request Gideon gave a detailed account of what had happened in Pawnee. Lavinia stepped in before he had finished. "You are still here, Gideon," she said. "May I come in, Father?"

"Yes," he agreed. Her father had turned back to Gideon. She heard him say: "We all know that the Kansas Central has been broke for years. This man Bent must have had something in his mind when he associated himself with Tull. Continue."

"Bent must have had this idea in mind from the first," Skene said. "The banks didn't shut down on him until they found out what he was up to in Topeka. They wanted the Kansas Central themselves then. They're behind Clanton—waiting like a pack of hungry wolves for the plum to drop from the tree."

The giant Jephtha nodded. He recognized the pattern of events. "A bill like that can't be lobbied through unless there's crookedness somewhere," he declared without fear of contradiction. "Bent is bribing someone."

"Father, what is this you are saying?" Lavinia demanded with a sharp intake of breath. "What has Mr. Bent done?"

Anger ran into her father's gray eyes, and this darkened room with its heavy chairs and table suddenly seemed too small to hold the wrath that was in him. "The unprincipled scoundrel is jamming a bill through the Kansas legislature that will bring his railroad to my very door if he can arrange it!" he burst out. "Whatever comes of that bill, once it's a law, I'll hold that man Bent responsible!"

He swept a litter of papers on his table into a drawer and turned a key on them.

"Father!" Lavinia exclaimed. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm leaving for Topeka immediately. You look after things here, Gideon."

The boy Junipero had come in from the rear. He had a smile for Skene, and then he was a mahogany statue.

"Get my grays and rig to the door at once," Jephtha ordered. His spring buggy with its yellow wheels, the fifth or sixth of its line, was well-known throughout the Territory. It was kept stocked with rifle, water, and food against his sudden departures.

"It's a long ride, Mr. Marr," Gideon said, thinking of the times he had seen that yellow-wheeled rig and its madly driven horses sweep by him on the trail in a cloud of dust.

"I've made it before," was the flat answer, and he was done with it.

Bending down, he put an arm around Lavinia and pressed his cheek against hers. He marched through the door that led into the bank then and spoke to his cashier. A few minutes later Junipero appeared with the team. Without even a farewell wave of his hand the big man cracked the reins over the horses and was away in a swirl of dust.

Lavinia and Gideon stood staring after him. The drive of the man had not lessened in the years Skene had known him. Like some mythical figure, he seemed to go on year after year. Gideon had often tried to picture him as he must have been when he first appeared in this country, when the Mexican flag still flew from the staff in Santa Fe.

Legend had it—and Jephtha Marr had never bothered to deny the tale—that he had been dispatched to the Southwest by a trader in St. Louis and, having been welcomed by Acting Governor Sandoval, had disposed of his goods at such fabulous prices that he had used the proceeds to establish himself in business and had forgotten—at least temporarily—to return to the United States. That debt had subsequently been paid, and Jephtha Marr had continued to prosper. But it was not only Mexican dollars that had held him captive in Santa Fe; there was a woman's smile. That was fact, not legend, for he had married lovely Inocencia Sandoval, Lavinia's mother, and her gift to him had been the great Rancho Santa Magdalena, then only a rolling wasteland that had never known the step of herder or *vaquero*.

Two weeks had passed. Skene had kept the work on schedule. Kiowa had begun to freight the quarterly issue of supplies to the Mescalero Reservation. Jephtha Marr could be expected any day now.

He arrived at night. Skene and Lavinia were together at the house when he came up the steps. They arose and were held back and silenced by something they saw on that rocky face. The gray eyes burned with a light that neither had ever seen before.

"I was too late," he said. "A month too late."

From his pocket he took out a folded copy of the *Topeka Republican* and laid it on the table for them to see. The headline said: "Railroad Act Becomes Law."

CHAPTER 9

JEPHTHA MARR arrived with his news only fourteen hours ahead of the stage. When it dropped the mail everyone had the story. Gideon had no way of knowing what the reaction would be in Santa Fe. Here in La Paz most men said no; a few hailed the hope of a railroad as the dawn of a new and better day for the Territory. Tuss MacWhinney, reputed to run more sheep than any man in New Mexico, immediately aligned himself with that hopeful minority. He had ridden into town with a long line of creaking *carros* piled high with his bagged wool that morning. He was never an easy man to get along with, and this talk of a railroad sharpened a tongue that was already

razor-edged.

"You've bled me dry for years with your high rates," he rapped at Jephtha Marr as they met on the warehouse floor. "The end of that's in sight, with the railroad comin'. A man'll be able to ship wool at a fair price."

"My rates are in keeping with the service I render," Marr said sharply. "I've never lost a bag of wool for you. Indian raids, floods, men killed—it hasn't mattered; your stuff has got through on schedule. It's made you a rich man. You might better bestir yourself to keep things as they are instead of spouting railroad."

"You ain't hard to figger," the other growled. "You're lookin' out for your own pocketbook. We ought to welcome that railroad with open arms. I warn you, there may be some feelin' agin a man who tries to block it."

"You fool!" Jephtha Marr said with shriveling contempt. "You run sheep on public land. Ninety per cent of it is open to entry. Bring a railroad in and you'll have an army of homesteaders and dirt farmers pushing you out of the San Andreas foothills!"

It was a sound argument, but MacWhinney refused to harken to it. "I'll take my chances on bein' pushed around," he declared truculently. "You've given yourself some high and mighty airs in your time. But there's an end to everythin'. You'll handle my clip next fall, and that's the last you'll handle!"

The veins in Jephtha Marr's neck swelled with anger, but even now he did not roar. "I've already handled your last shipment," he said, and it was like a wave breaking on a rocky shore. "Salazar!" he called to his *capataz*. "Miguel Salazar!" The warehouse foreman came on the run. "Have these bags put back on the carts," he told the man. It took MacWhinney a moment to get his meaning.

"Marr, you can't do that," the sheepman protested. "I've got to get this wool East!"

Jephtha turned on his heel. "You'll have to find some other way of getting it there."

Gideon walked to the office with him.

"There'll be others like MacWhinney," the big man declared. "I took the right course with him. I'll go to Santa Fe this afternoon and see Barlow and Alex Majors. The big freighting outfits will stand together. I haven't any doubt of that. In the meantime, Gideon, I want you to find old Ben Lusk for me. Bring him to the office as quick as you can."

"He may be drunk," Skene reminded him. "He often is."

"Well, sober him up."

Gideon found the old frontiersman in his favorite cantina.

"Come along," Skene said. "Mr. Marr wants to see you."

Jephtha wasted no time on inconsequentials when Skene led the man into the office. "Ben, you were working for Alex Majors when they tried sending their wagons up across Kansas to North Platte and the Union Pacific. What was wrong with that idea? Why did they give it up?"

"I routed them wagons fer the comp'ny," the old man declared proudly.

"I reckon they give it up because she was a mite shorter haul to Pawnee. Ain't nuthin' the matter with the northern country once yuh git across the Arkansaw. They ain't a good crossin' in a hundred miles. It was my idear to build a scow and ferry the wagons over."

"That's very interesting," was Marr's comment. He saw the question in Skene's eyes, but he did not stop to enlighten him. "What about the Smoky Hill and the Republican River,"

"They're apt to be bad fer a few days in the early spring. Nuthin' serious." Ben gave Jephtha a shrewd glance. "Yuh considerin' sendin' wagons up that-a-way?"

"That's exactly what I propose to do," was the emphatic answer. "We'll use the old trail as far as Grande Saline and then turn north. It will mean building four or five stations and outfitting them."

In the face of such a revolutionary step as this Gideon could not remain silent. "It'll add two days to the haul, Mr. Marr. The rates will have to be raised, and if we do, we'll never be able to compete with the trade to Pawnee."

"That's all very true. But I'm not looking for a profit. I'd carry my plans out if I knew that I was going to lose money on every wagon I sent to North Platte. I don't propose to feed a wolf that's trying to devour me. I'll keep every pound of freight away from the Kansas Central that I can. I believe Majors and the others will see it as I do."

Gideon knew it was the man's way to do the unexpected, to accomplish the impossible, but the boldness of this move amazed even him.

"Ben, you're working for me," Marr told the old man. "Keep my business to yourself. That's all for now, but you taper off. I want you to be in condition to leave La Paz tomorrow."

"I'll go yuh!" Lusk promised. "Don't yuh hev nary a worry about this ole coon bein' fit to travel."

He shuffled out, his dirty buckskins flapping about his thin shanks. When the door closed on him Jephtha turned to Skene with an explanation. "I want you to see what he can show you up there. Locate your route and give some thought to the stations." He walked to the map on the wall and studied it for a few minutes. "It won't cost much to build a ferry at the Arkansas crossing. I don't believe we'll have to spend a dollar in North Platte. The Union Pacific will welcome the business. But I'll leave that end of it to Majors. All I ask of you, Gideon, is to find a feasible way of getting there."

With that in mind Gideon moved north with Ben Lusk. Blazing a trail across the rolling prairies offered no difficulties. North of the Arkansas it was a little different, but the old man knew his way. "Ain't nuthin' to be afeared of but water in the spring and snow in winter, now that the 'Rapaho are quiet."

Gideon was forced to agree with him, and as they left Kansas behind and struck off across Nebraska the feeling grew on him that this cutoff—Marr's Cutoff he called it on the map he was making—was not the imprac-

tical, even foolhardy venture that he had first believed it to be. The great blizzards of January would close it temporarily, but if the bulk of the freight now moving to Pawnee could be diverted to the cutoff, not even snow could block it long.

After an absence of nineteen days he returned to La Paz with an enthusiastic report. Jephtha Marr was able to tell him that the big freighting outfits had banded together; that work on Marr's Cutoff was to begin at once. By the middle of July long trains of wagons were moving over it, and the old trail to Pawnee and the East was almost deserted.

Skene was glad to see Lavinia laughing and lighthearted again. Young Daniels had long since arrived at Fort Logan. Gideon often encountered him in La Paz, usually in her company. She had been admitted to the select circle that might call him Spooky. The social functions at the post began to find her in regular attendance. It kept her mind off the news from the East. According to the *Topeka Republican* the Kansas Central was now the Kansas Central and Pacific, and President Tull and General Manager Bent were planning to build the road all the way to the Coast. It was the sort of big talk that Gideon expected from Bent. In the meantime they had lost a month already, and construction westward had not begun. Knowing that the railroad must be feeling the pinch of its lost revenue from the trail, Gideon wondered how much longer it would be before Clanton's crowd took over. He appreciated that, although they had been sniping at the Kansas Central for weeks, they had been as gratified as Bent to have that golden plum, the Kansas Railroad Act, shaken from the political tree. Knowing it must fall, even lending a helping hand under cover, they were ready to fight for possession of it the moment it was safely down. The newspapers were full of it, and, back in Pawnee, Clanton began to press his attack in earnest. Jephtha Marr had played right into his hands in establishing the cutoff.

Champ, with his peculiar talent for ruthlessness, was thoroughly familiar with what could be accomplished by violence and bloodshed. He didn't propose to limit himself to such crude measures, however, and as his plans matured they included a move which, if equally primitive, was calculated to be somewhat less obvious. Bent's private life was no secret to him, and it presented him with an opportunity that he believed could be turned to his advantage. He was sure of it the moment he learned, through sources on which he could depend, that the rumored engagement of the spectacular Rita Molyneaux, the singer, and Wick Sansome, son of St. Louis' most influential banker, was definitely and violently at an end, the immensely wealthy Sansome family having most emphatically said no.

Clanton, always a big spender, knew Rita as well as he knew Bent—they had met at one of his parties. He could imagine her fury and chagrin. Caught at a loose end like this, very likely in need of money, he did not doubt for a moment but what she could be induced to come out to Pawnee. She had once so completely bewitched Steve that his interest in business had dwindled almost to the vanishing point, and Champ was willing to

believe that she could do it again.

Without further delay Clanton dispatched a letter to Rita that stated his terms. In the meantime Bent had organized what men he could muster and established his first camp several miles beyond town. Making use of what material he had on hand, the actual work of construction began to inch westward toward Gallatin. Champ was still waiting for his answer when his spies informed him that Steve had left suddenly for the Territory. Rita's reply came several days later. Clanton smiled as he read it. "Just as I thought," he mused. "Steve Bent will have a little surprise waiting for him when he gets back."

Desperation had been behind Bent's sudden departure for the West. The company was in immediate need of funds. He had expected the freight revenues of the road to help him over the first forty miles that had to be completed before the state came to his aid. Marr's Cutoff had spoiled the end of that.

If he thought of Lavinia as standing on her balcony in La Paz, eyes turned to the north and her pulse quickening as some sixth sense told her of his coming, he was sadly mistaken. Quite the reverse was true. These were full days for her, for with the officers' wives and families at Logan preparing for the annual pilgrimage back East to escape the August heat, she had sent out invitations for a farewell party in their honor. On the evening of the party Jephtha had left his office an hour earlier than he was in the habit of doing, and when Lavinia's guests began to arrive he stood at her side, greeting them with her.

He told himself that little of this would have been possible just a few years ago. If life in the Territory was better he knew he need not take second place to any man in claiming credit for the change. It was the things he had accomplished and the things he stood for that had made it possible. There was a deep draught of satisfaction in the thought for him.

Seeing Gideon surrender Lavinia to young Daniels, he made his way around the ballroom to where the former stood watching the dancers. "Well, this is a delightful evening," he said. "Everyone seems to be enjoying himself. And how nicely Vinia carries it off."

"Yes," Skene agreed, his glance following her as she glided by in Daniels' arms. "She is very sure of herself."

The ardent attention the lieutenant had been paying her had not escaped Skene's notice. He was amused rather than disturbed by it, seeing how easily Lavinia held him off. They had just turned a corner of the room when he saw her stop suddenly and stare at the door, her face bloodless in a moment. "Stephen!" she cried.

Gideon's forward step brought him in full sight of the doorway. Bent stood there, faultlessly attired, his crooked, ingratiating grin broad on his face. The music continued to play, but as Lavinia left Daniels and stood facing this uninvited guest, a number of couples stopped dancing, sensing that something was happening.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion, Mr. Bent?" she demanded coldly.

Bent stepped forward, unabashed.

"Why, I told you I'd see you in La Paz, Lavinia," he said. "I have business with your father——"

"My father conducts his business from his office," she informed him in a tone she would not have used to a servant. "Please have the decency to leave."

Bent looked at her with a peculiar amazement. "You don't mean that, Lavinia. You told—— I'm sorry," he ended. "I appear to have made a mistake." He looked about him with a vast contempt for a moment and then turned through the door and was gone. Spooky Daniels, understanding the situation better than most, quickly bore Lavinia away, and the other dancers swung into time.

"The black gall of the man," Jephtha Marr ground out. "Go after him, Gideon! Bring him to my office. If he has any business with me it will be conducted tonight! He'll leave La Paz tomorrow morning if he has to go at gun point!"

CHAPTER 10

THE POSADA of Tiburcio Puente was the only public house in La Paz. Skene turned his steps in that direction and within the block overtook Bent.

"You were a fool to show your face here, Bent," Gideon said.

"Yeh?" The other laughed. "I go where my business takes me."

"Any business you have with Mr. Marr won't keep you waiting. He's on his way down to his office now."

"That suits me to a T," Bent said carelessly. "I lead the way if you're the watchdog around here."

Turning the corner, Gideon saw that a light burned in the office. Jephtha Marr sat at his table when they entered. Bent lost some of his aplomb at sight of the man.

"State your business with me and make it brief," the giant said, his tense, charged voice running to the far corners of the big room.

"My business is with you alone," Bent informed him.

"Then you have no business with me at all. I'll bid you good night——"

"Wait a minute!" Steve burst out. "Your highhanded methods don't frighten me. You have your price, Mr. Marr, the same as anyone else. Both of us are losing money on every wagon you send to North Platte. You've taken a trick, but you can't stop this railroad. Instead of bucking us, come in with us. We'll make a place for you on our board. The Kansas Central and Pacific can make you the biggest man between St. Louis and California."

Jephtha Marr stood up, and all the will that was in him spoke now. "I wouldn't throw in with your railroad if I knew it would make me President of these United States! My wagons will continue to go to North Platte. I'll fight you with everything I possess. I have nothing further to say."

"All right," Bent muttered. "You're taking a stand that you'll live to regret. When the fighting is all over you'll find the railroad running through La Paz."

Gideon rode up to the inn after a very early breakfast. He had a saddled horse on a rope for Bent. No one was stirring inside. After a repeated ringing of the bell Tiburcio Puente appeared, his jaw so swollen he had difficulty speaking.

"I want to see Mr. Bent, Tiburcio," Skene told him.

The innkeeper shook his head. "Señor Bent ees not here."

"Not here?"

"No. Three men come for heem during the night. They drag heem out of bed and take heem away." He pointed to his jaw. "Ees none of my beezness, but I try to estop them. This ees what I get."

"What three men?" Gideon demanded. "You mean men who work for Mr. Marr or me?"

"No!" Puente declared. "I never see these men before."

Skene had the man show him Bent's room. Signs of a struggle were plentiful. There was a smear of blood on the bed. Getting a description of the men from the innkeeper, Gideon decided to lose no time in acquainting Jeptha Marr with news of Bent's strange disappearance. He found him at breakfast. Despite the early hour Lavinia had joined her father.

Gideon quickly explained the reason for his presence. With his first word Lavinia pushed back her chair and sat up stiffly. Her face was white when he finished. "Father!" she cried accusingly.

Marr shook his head. "No, you're mistaken," he said stolidly. "I don't propose to have that man Bent snooping about the Territory, lining my enemies up against me and raising money, but I had nothing to do with this. In fact, I'm wondering if Bent didn't arrange his own abduction just to whip up feeling against me! Find out what's become of him." It was all he had to say. Taking his hat from old Tomas, he strode out of the house.

Kiowa had arrived in La Paz from Capistrano that morning. Skene found him at the freight house. The little man had heard the news.

"Slip a rifle in your saddle boot," Gideon told him. "We're going after him."

"You got some idea where to look?" Kiowa asked.

"If these men were strangers they must have drifted in from the east. It's reasonable to suppose they'd leave the same way. We'll stay north of the river until we hit Apache Crossing. We can work down through the San Andreas hills then. Someone will have seen them."

Just before noon they reached Ab Hooton's little cow ranch on the upper Rio Concho. "No," Hooton told them, "I ain't seen no one driftin' through the country this mornin'. I ran into strangers over at Big Bat's place at the Crossin' the other day though. They looked like Texas gun slingers to me. There were three of 'em."

Skene thanked him and rode on at once. "I guess that proves up on what I've been thinking," he told Kiowa. "These men were hired for this job,

and that spells Champ Clanton to me."

Big Bat Duval stood behind his bar when they walked into his place. His back-country saloon and three or four adobe jacals were all there was to Apache Crossing. The river was fringed with quicksand for several miles in either direction. It was responsible for what little business came Duval's way. A dirty, obese man with an evil reputation, Big Bat welcomed Skene, nevertheless.

"We're just here looking for a little information, Bat," Skene told him. "What about these Texans that were here the other day? Have you seen any more of them?"

The Frenchman beckoned him closer, for with the gentry that patronized his establishment a whisper ran a long way. "Dem faller was here dis mornin'," he said. "'Bout daylight. Sometin' very fonny happen. Dey have beeg laugh."

"Git on with it, Bat," Kiowa scolded. "We ain't got all day to stand here gassin' with you. What was funny?"

Duval dismissed the interruption with a wave of his fat hand. "Dey tak' faller out of La Paz las' night. Dey gæve him good bustin' up, den strip him down to his underpants, strap him de wrong way round on a mule, and turn him loose in de hills."

Skene had heard enough. The last doubt that Clanton was responsible was gone from his mind.

"Come on, Ki," he said. "We'll cross the river and see if we can pick up Bent's trail. If he wanders around all day under this sun with next to no clothes on him, it'll kill him."

Kiowa was a good tracker, but the afternoon was half gone before he picked up a definite clue. "This is his trail all right," he declared, "but this mule ain't jest wanderin' along by hisself. He's bein' told where to head. These tracks line out straight as a die fer that notch in the San Andreas Peaks."

"How old are they?" Skene asked.

"Seven to eight hours. Bent certainly untied hisself 'fore the sun got very high. What gits me is why is he headin' this way? Mebbe he's lookin' fer water."

"That's as good a guess as any," Gideon said. "We'll tail after him."

They were able to move faster now, but evening fell before they reached the high meadows around the peaks. They dry-camped where they were. In the morning they followed Bent's trail over the crest and down the far slope. The country began to change. There was good graze here and some water.

"Tuss MacWhinney's country," Kiowa said.

"Yeh. We won't get much of a reception here. . . . What is it, Ki?" Skene asked in a hurry as he saw the little man pull up sharply.

"Bent's been found. Somebody picked him up here. A herder or one of Tuss' sons. Tracks headin' for MacWhinney's house."

They approached the house from the rear, and it was not until they

swung around to the front that they saw the string of horses tethered at the rack. Before they could ask the meaning of it, Tuss MacWhinney, his two strapping sons, several other sheepmen, and Beltran Chavez, the merchant from Capistrano, emerged from within. Chavez and MacWhinney's neighbors drew back into the house at sight of Skene and Kiowa, as though fearful lest their presence here be noted and the information relayed to Jephtha Marr. The MacWhinneys were less reticent. The boys grabbed their guns, and old Tuss stepped forward to do the talking, his hawklike face hard with anger.

"Hold up!" he cried. "Where do you think you're ridin'? If a man can be run out of Marr's Castle and be worked over by you devils and turned loose to die, I reckon there's nothin' to stop us from runnin' you off our range! Git out while the goin' is good!"

"Mr. Marr had nothing to do with this business," Skene said, aware of every little movement here. "Bent knows it, if he'll only admit the truth. Send him out."

"Bent ain't here," MacWhinney growled. "And it's none of your damned business where he's at. You'll find he's got plenty of friends in this country who'll see that Jephtha Marr keeps his hands off him. For the second time I'm tellin' you to clear out!"

"All right," Skene agreed stonily. "When you see your friend Bent tell him that Clanton arranged that little ride for him."

"And when you see Jephtha Marr tell him I bought a hundred thousand dollars' worth of railroad stock!" MacWhinney flung back. "Tell him there's others who are doin' the same!"

Skene spurred his horse close. "You'll wish many times that you had your money back, Tuss," he said with chilling conviction. "You've given it to the wrong man. This is a three-way fight. If the railroad is built Steve Bent won't build it. I'll stop him even if I have to throw in with Clanton's bunch to do it!"

CHAPTER 11

THOUGH it was late at night when Skene reached La Paz, lights burned in the big house, and he knew that Jephtha Marr was waiting up in the hope that he would come. Finding Lavinia with her father, he did not carry his story beyond the fact that he had trailed Bent to Tuss MacWhinney's sheep ranch.

Lavinia was no sooner out of the room, however, than his face drew tight and he turned his gray eyes on Gideon. "Let's have it now. What happened at MacWhinney's place?"

"He's given Bent a hundred thousand dollars. Chavez was there. Beltran Chavez, and Rayner and Cleveland and one or two others. According to Tuss, they're all putting up money."

The news stunned the big man for a moment, and he did not try to hide

the fact. "The fools!" he ground out. "They'll pay for their folly! And Chavez . . ." He shook his head. "I've so often befriended him. . . Did you talk to Bent?"

"No, MacWhinney said he wasn't there, and as he put it, it wasn't any of my damned business where he was, but they'd see that we didn't get our hands on him." Skene had seldom been as sober. "Mr. Marr, there's no point in handling this situation with kid gloves any longer. If Bent isn't stopped in a hurry he'll raise three quarters of a million dollars in the Territory. I propose to stop him. I'll get what men I need at the Cross Rivers ranch—Frank Childress, the Oatwines, and seven or eight others—and turn this country upside down until I find him. When I do I won't take any halfway measures."

Jeptha Marr nodded his grim approval. "That's the common-sense thing to do. We should have taken the step when we had him here in La Paz."

They discussed Clanton's part in the struggle at length. They agreed that the move he had made had helped neither him nor themselves.

"The way it worked out, it played right into Bent's hand," Skene said. "But Clanton won't stop there."

"I know it," was the weighty response. "We may get some help from him."

The suggestion made Gideon shake his head. "We'll pay a high price for it if we do, Mr. Marr. It'll be the old story of jumping out of the frying pan into the fire."

The gray eyes seemed to throw off sparks. Suddenly they were colder than ice. "It's inevitable that blood will be spilled," he declared. "A man will be for you or against you, and there'll be no straddling the fence. I tell you these things because you are bound to run into opposition in going after Bent. Where do you expect to find him?"

"I'll start looking for him in the San Andreas hills. If I don't turn him up I'll try Capistrano next and keep on until I get him."

He was at MacWhinney's sheep ranch at the head of a dozen seasoned men the following day. A Mexican herder met him with the statement that he was there alone. Over the man's protests he searched the house and found no one.

A sharp harangue in Spanish followed, but the herder shrugged and insisted he did not know where the MacWhinneys were to be found. Among the men Skene had with him were some who held Mexicans cheaply. Frank Childress and Henry Oatwine, who had been through the Lincoln County war, were two.

"The little greaser savvys where they are," Childress growled. "It won't take me long to rap the truth out of him."

"That won't be necessary, Frank," Gideon said. "If Tuss and his sons are off to some secret meeting with Bent they would never have let this boy know where they were going. Let's get out of here! We'll have a look at Val Cleveland's place."

Cleveland, a long, stringy man, came to the door with a rifle cradled in

his arms. "I don't want no truck with yuh," he warned. "Turn around and git out of my yard! I'll bust the first man that leaves his saddle!"

"We don't mean you no harm," Skene flung back. "We're looking for Steve Bent, and we're going to look here."

"Some more of Jephtha Marr's highhanded doin's, eh?" Cleveland screeched. "Bustin' into a man's home whether he'll have it or not! You try that here and that big psalm-singing son of a gun that pays you yore wages will have another funeral to attend!"

Gideon knew that this cantankerous hook-nosed man was not bluffing, though the odds against him were prohibitive. He reminded himself that he was not bluffing. "You're asking for trouble that can be avoided," he said. "If there's any shooting here there'll be a lot of it. You better stand that rifle up against the house, Cleveland. I'll have to look inside and that's all there'll be to it—unless Bent's here." His men had spread out fanwise. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Henry Oatwine slip around the corner of the house. Seeing that, he talked faster, holding Cleveland's attention. A few seconds later Oatwine appeared in the doorway behind the man and flung himself at him. They went down together, and before Cleveland knew what was happening Frank Childress kicked the rifle out of his grasp.

Skene was inside only a few minutes. "No one here," he announced as he stepped out. "Drop the cartridges out of that rifle, Frank, and we'll move along."

"You dirty skunks!" Cleveland raged. "You can't run over me without payin' fer it! I'll catch up with you fer this!"

Skene raised his hand and rode off. Refusing to take no for an answer, he searched half a dozen sheep camps before night fell. In every instance he met a stone wall of hostility, and it weighed heavier on him than the fact that he had learned nothing of Bent's whereabouts.

They camped that night at Purgatory Springs.

Moving down out of the San Andreas hills, they struck off across the plain toward Capistrano, scouring the country with a fine comb. The resistance he met was not confined to sheepmen. There were cow outfits on the Capistrano Plains, small fry who didn't figure in Jephtha Marr's plans. If they knew where Bent was they weren't saying, but they flung the information that they had bought stock in the railroad into Skene's face.

"What do you figger it means?" Henry Oatwine asked as they rode on toward Capistrano. "I never heard so much talk about schools and churches and civilization. And yet they seem to mean it. It ain't just that they're buckin' the old man."

"It's Bent's smooth tongue that's behind all this," Gideon said. "He's painted a dream for them—promised everything. When you tell a woman that the railroad means better schools for her children, that prices will go down in the stores, and that she'll be able to buy things that can't be found west of Kansas City today, she's interested. He doesn't show them the other side of the picture—higher taxes, no more free range, grass being plowed up, and the country being turned into a dust bowl. He doesn't tell them

how he hopes to fatten his purse."

He glanced at Oatwine to find him staring off across the plain. Sweeping toward them was a body of horsemen, fully twenty strong.

"Cavalry," Oatwine muttered. "Headin' right for us."

Skene gave the order to pull up. "I don't know what this means," he said. "Just remember that we haven't any quarrel with the military."

In a few seconds he saw that Spooky Daniels was the officer in command, but as they faced each other he realized at a glance that the lieutenant had very definitely laid aside his friendly, carefree manner.

"This is bad business," Daniels said. "We might as well get to the point. I've been ordered out to put a stop to your activities. It's beyond argument that you've been entering one house after another at gun point or with the threat of guns. I don't want to read the riot act to you, Gid, but the least I can let you off with is to order you to stop and to see that these men return to Mr. Marr's Cross Rivers ranch."

Gideon thought it over for a moment, his face tight-lipped and sober. Finally he said, "I'd like to speak to you privately, Lieutenant."

Daniels motioned for him to ride off a hundred yards with him. "I have something to say to you that is private too," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"Spooky, you know I'm looking for Bent. I'm curious to know why a troop of cavalry was turned out to stop me. By any chance, did the request come from La Paz?"

They fenced with their eyes a long moment.

"From a young lady, possibly?" Daniels queried.

"Yeh."

The lieutenant shook a very positive no. "She isn't worrying about Bent. She knows he is safe."

Skene felt something beneath the surface that wasn't being said. "How could she know?" he demanded bluntly. "She's in Santa Fe."

"Yeh—and so is Steve Bent. General Wallace is giving a farewell banquet in his honor this evening."

The news floored Gideon for a moment, and he did not try to conceal the fact. Bent being honored by the Governor of the Territory. Lavinia and Bent in Santa Fe together!

"We had the news by pigeon post from the Presidio this morning," Spooky explained. He wasn't any happier about it than Gideon. "There's nothing you can do about it."

"I'll do something about it," Skene burst out. "I'm going to Santa Fe."

"He'll be gone before you get there, man!"

"I'll see about that." Gideon rode back to the men. "Henry," he said to Oatwine, "I've changed my plans. I'm going to Santa Fe. You and the boys head back to Cross Rivers. And you, Frank, go into town and have a doctor look at that leg. I don't like the way its puffing up."

"Any word for the old man?" Oatwine asked.

"No."

Skene already had his horse in motion. Before another question could be put to him he was gone. Ahead of him lay a ride that would test the full measure of his stamina. The morning was well along already. That horseflesh could take him from the Capistrano Plains to Santa Fe in less than ten hours was beyond belief. He set that as his goal and broke the long journey into steps, planning to get a fresh mount here and another there. If time was to be saved it could be best saved here on the plains; by midafternoon he would have a mountain trail ahead of him.

When night fell he was at the hot springs. He decided that the horse he was riding was better than the one Fernan Garcia offered him. He still had two hours' riding ahead of him. After wasting a minute to stretch his legs he was on his way. When the moon swung up over his back trail he knew it was ten o'clock, and as yet he had not caught a glimpse of Santa Fe. But on this Alamitos trail he would be on top of the town before he saw it. Suddenly it was there. Turning into Pacific Street, he made his way to the palace. The doors and windows stood open, and from these vantage points a crowd watched the proceedings within.

Skene pushed his way up to a door. Bent was addressing the assemblage. "Certain entrenched interests in the Territory have banded together to fight the railroad," he was saying. "They are not interested in the future of this country. They are selfish men who want it kept as it is. They won't see that the railroad means prosperity for all. But I have no fear of them. They can't hold back the progress that you and I know is on the way. The great majority of you want the railroad. You've proved it by the money you've subscribed."

Gideon listened, but his eyes were roving over the room. He saw Judge McCandless and Clara, but Lavinia was not with them. He sighed unconsciously as though freed from a load that had become almost too heavy to bear. He saw that MacWhinney was here and a score more with whom he was acquainted—Santa Fe businessmen, one or two from San Miguel, and Beltran Chavez from Capistrano. It was a formidable gathering, but he told himself that the men who could make or break the Territory were not present.

Bent finished his address and sat down to a burst of applause. Skene ached to drive his fist into that grinning face. "It's a long way back to Kansas," he told himself. "He'll have something to remember before he gets there."

CHAPTER 12

THOUGH Bent returned to Kansas with the immediate financial problem solved he knew that, despite his best efforts, weeks must still pass before construction could go forward under full steam. The Kansas Central and Pacific had credit again, but you couldn't grade a right of way or lay track with credit. Steel, ties, equipment, and men were needed, and needed in

quantity.

For a week he dashed back and forth between Pawnee and Kansas City, conferring with Tull, prodding his labor contractors, and frantically wiring for quick deliveries on material from the East. His boundless energy began to show some results. Checkmated in one direction by Clanton's recognizable but unseen hand, he always managed to break through in another.

Champ viewed the situation philosophically and refused to be disturbed even when Matt Brannigan came to report that two carloads of Irish laborers had just passed through Pawnee.

"Whin McSween, Bent's labor boss, could git nothin' in the hirin' halls, he puts a band on a truck and rides through the Patch shoutin' that he's payin' a dollar and a half fer pick-and-shovel min, and offerin' thim free beer. No wander he's gittin' min!"

"Don't let it worry you," Clanton told him. "We slowed him up and made him pay. The days are slipping away; we'll see that he never gets them back." He smiled confidently. "I've arranged a little surprise for him."

He did not elucidate, but Brannigan found his own answer when he saw Rita Molyneaux and her maid step down from the evening train in all her glamour.

Rita surveyed the rough, raw town with chilling disdain, and when she had established herself in the best rooms the Pawnee House afforded she found no reason to like it any better. Almost from the day she had graduated from the Ursuline convent in her native New Orleans hers had been a luxurious existence. By the time the critics discovered that she possessed a voice of singular quality and began to predict a great operatic future for her, her beauty of face and figure had already attracted attention. Shrewd, selfish, and lazy, even then, it had not taken her long to decide that, with her pale olive skin and languorous dark eyes, she could find an easier and shorter path to fame than a possible career in opera.

Clanton was aware that she had arrived. She had been ready to leave St. Louis for several weeks, but Champ had instructed her to wait, having no desire to be burdened with her until Bent was on the scene again. He gave her an hour in which to refresh herself and get over the shock of Pawnee before he knocked at her door. He found her angrily pacing the floor, her ripe red mouth brimming with indignation. He recognized the familiar danger signals. "Glad you got here," he said in his matter-of-fact way. She wheeled on him tigerishly.

"Champ, you devil, I could strangle you for this! You always tried to tell me I was mad. Is this your way of proving it—dragging me out to this Godforsaken place? A tin outfit! Hot water out of a tin cile! And this!" She took in the offending furnishings with an eloquent sweep of her arm. "A week of it will kill me!"

"I predict it will come nearer to killing the proprietor," he observed dryly. She was here, and whether she liked it or not was irrelevant to him. "Don't create yourself over nothing; you can't ask too much of a frontier town. I want to have a talk with you. Are we alone?"

"For a few minutes." Rita recognized that, as usual, her temper was wasted on Clanton. "Sit down, if you can find a chair that you think will hold you."

Clanton studied her with a critical regard as she closed the door to the adjoining room. It satisfied him that she had lost none of her allure since he had seen her last.

"I could have come to St. Louis," he said frankly, "but if you are going to do anything for me, Rita, it will have to be done here. My letters must have given you some idea of what I have in mind."

"They were plain enough," she acknowledged. "Where is Steve?"

"His camp is a few miles west of here, but he's in Pawnee every day or so. Just how do things stand between you?"

Rita shrugged. "We haven't exchanged a word in over a year. I've seen him several times in the dining room at the Planters'. I wouldn't say he was friendly."

"You wouldn't expect him to be, would you, after the way you walked out on him? Whatever gave you the idea you could marry Wick Sansome and crash that family of blue bloods?"

Rita's eyes flashed with sharp annoyance. "Do we have to go into that?"

Unmoved, Clanton examined his carefully manicured nails for a moment. "It's over; that's all that matters. Steve may have cooled off, but you'll find he's still interested in you if you play it right. Lord knows you had him jumping through rings for two or three years; there wasn't anything he wouldn't do for you."

"There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for him," Rita's tone held a measure of amazement and regret as old memories spickened. "I was in love with the big roughneck. I had to be to stand for his conceit and bulldozing. I don't suppose you'd give me credit for that; I've always been just a beautiful, dangerous snake to you, Champ." Her laugh was bitter. "I've often wondered why you introduced us. You knew all about me long before he showed up, but from the day you went into business together you did your best to part us."

"It wasn't because I was wrong about you; it was Steve who fooled me. He looked at you and forgot all about business. I'm ready to gamble that you'll have the same effect on him this time." Clanton pushed a sheaf of bills across the table. "There's five thousand dollars as a starter. There'll be more from time to time. All you have to do is to divert him—slow him up—take his mind off his work. The more successful you are, the more it will be worth to me."

Rita glanced at the money, then up at him.

"Champ, you're a rat," she murmured, her frankness matching his own. "I always knew you were."

"Whatever we are, we at least understand each other," Clanton observed without anger; "we know what we want. I'm not asking for the whole lot; if Steve wants to talk turkey he can have a slice of it. He'll find out what he's up against as the weeks go by. The interests I represent are

determined to gain control of the Kansas Central. We'll get it or the road will never be completed."

"If you're going to take a chance on me, Champ, you better go all the way. I've got to know where I stand. After all, Steve's no fool. Even if he doesn't suspect that you brought me out here that won't be enough. I've got to have some excuse for walking back into his life. Telling him I'm in love with him again won't do it; it's too late for that."

"Don't fool yourself. He's still a man and you're still a woman. When he sees you he'll begin to remember and have you in his arms quickly enough. I know Steve."

Rita's lips curled in disgust. "Only a swine would put it that way. If you think he'd have me on that basis you don't know Steve at all. I've got to make him believe I came out here to help him—that I can do something for him."

"You're right!" Clanton's round, sharp eyes kindled with sudden conviction. "That's smart of you, Rita. Maybe I can give you a lead. I told you I had St. Louis money behind me. Four of the biggest bankers in the Mound City have their fingers in this pie. Maybe you can guess who got them together and is now leading this fight."

The way he put it, there could be only one answer. Rita Molyneaux got to her feet slowly, her surprise complete. "Champ, you don't mean it!"

Clanton nodded stolidly. "Eli Sansome."

"Eli Sansome—Wick's father!" Rita could only shake her head at the irony of it. Her eyes flashed angrily then. "So that's your fine old blue-blooded aristocrat! Eli Sansome! I wasn't good enough for his fine old family, so he slammed the door in my face." She laughed contemptuously. "The plundering old buzzard got down to my level in a hurry. This makes everything real chummy. . . . It will be a pleasure to walk into his office someday and tell him how I enjoyed taking his dirty money."

"I don't care what you think about Sansome," Clanton said flatly. "When this is all over you can stand out in front of his bank and tell everybody in St. Louis that he's a skunk if you want to. All you've got to remember now is that there is money enough in this to put you on easy street for the rest of your life. Bent won't be hard to convince when you come to him with this story. I'll leave it to you to make the most of it. If you can sell him the idea that you can supply him with information he'll keep you close to him. Drive out and see him tomorrow. I'm going to Topeka in the morning, but I'll be back in a day or two. It shouldn't be necessary for us to see a great deal of each other. When we chance to meet around the hotel or on the street we can be friendly. That'll be better than telling Bent you haven't seen me; he knows I'm here."

"I've changed Steve's mind for him before. You leave it to me, Champ."

"It shouldn't be too difficult," Clanton said heavily as he turned to go. "If Bent's got any idea that Lavinia Marr can ever mean anything to him he's stark mad. With her father fighting this railroad tooth and nail, knowing his freighting business is ruined if it's completed, hating Bent as he never

was hated before, I tell you that girl would cut off her arm before she would let herself become interested in him."

"I wonder," Rita murmured cynically. "Women do some strange things."

Late the following morning, seated in the most fashionable rig the town afforded, Rita was ready to be driven across the prairie to Bent's camp. She had dressed carefully for this occasion, and Pawnee's awed and admiring male population lined up to see her pass.

She did not expect to find the camp a scene of bustling activity, with great piles of material on hand and foremen and bosses barking orders at an army of men and teams. She was better informed than that, whether Clanton knew it or not. Even so, Camp Number One fell far short of what she was prepared to find. At first glimpse it seemed no larger than a tiny dot against the endless horizon. A couple of switch engines, a string of flats, Steven's headquarters car, and the made-over boxcar that housed the engineering staff comprised the rolling stock. Off to the west, beyond the tents, a grading crew of possibly a hundred men was throwing up the new roadbed. Of steel and ties and equipment of various kinds there didn't seem to be any. That a great railroad could ever sprout from such humble beginnings seemed incredible.

Men gaped and sighed in their beards with their masculine hunger at sight of Rita, with her wasplike waist and pulse-quickenning ledge of bosom. Unabashed by their glances, she rode up to Bent's car. Along with the car, Steve had fallen heir to old Gus, Tull's colored steward. He was polishing the brasswork on the rear platform. His eyes popped as he looked up and found Rita waiting to be helped down. Being a true forerunner of a generation of grinning, ebony-faced Pullman porters yet to come, he prided himself on his acquaintance with the greats and near greats who traveled. He recognized Rita at once. Squaring his thin shoulders, he ran down the car steps and hurried to her side.

"The Louisiana Nightingale," he murmured, bowing in sincere homage. "Permit me to assist you, Miss Molyneaux."

Rita rewarded him with a smile and took his hand. "Am I fortunate enough to find Mr. Bent here?" she asked.

"Yas-s-s-s ma'am!" Gus declared, white teeth flashing. "I'll tell him——"

"Don't bother," Rita broke in. "I'll tell him myself."

Steve was alone, bent over a flat-topped desk that he had had set up in the lounge of the car, when she entered. She stood there, head tilted at a fetching angle, waiting for him to look up. Grumbling to himself as he worked, he finally slammed his pencil down on the desk and swung around in his chair. An amazed silence gripped him as he beheld her. The silence was becoming unbearable to Rita, when he threw back his head and filled the car with his raucous laughter. "So the cat came back, eh? Well, baby, the cream's all gone! The trains on this road all run the other way; you're headed in the wrong direction."

Pin points of anger flashed in Rita's eyes as she pretended to ignore the studied insolence of his greeting. "You sound natural. You always were

a past master at insulting people. But I haven't lost my way, Steve; that's not why I'm here. I thought this out pretty carefully before coming. . . . You might be decent enough to ask me to be seated."

"Sure, take a chair," he growled. He looked for signs of deterioration in her and failed to find them; her classic beauty was as flawless as ever, and her long, beautiful legs had lost none of their perfection. Sight of her brought back memories of other days, but they left him cold. For months he had been telling himself that she meant nothing to him, and now that they had met he was more convinced than ever that the thrill of her was gone. "You must have something important on your mind to bring you all the way out here from St. Louis." He grinned contemptuously. "Do you want me to name it?"

"No, Steve; you'd only be guessing. One thing you can be sure of: I didn't come to dig up the past; that's just as dead with me as it is with you. You want to build this railroad. Maybe I can help you."

"You?" he jeered. "You'd be a great help! Don't hand me that, Rita! Clanton got you out here. I knew he'd think of you sooner or later and try to turn you loose on me in the hope that you could get him some information."

It was Rita's turn to laugh. "You always knew all the answers," she said bitingly, "but they were usually wrong. Instead of trying to get information out of you, I'm here to give you some. If I'm on your side it isn't on your account. I'm thinking strictly of myself; for weeks I've wanted to get even with a certain party in St. Louis, and I've found the way. If you'll get that miserable sneer off your face I'll try to tell you what I mean. It isn't only Clanton who's out to smash you. He's got someone behind him."

"You're not telling me anything," Bent muttered. "Three or four St. Louis banks——"

"One man, Steve: Eli Sansome!"

Bent straightened up in his chair, his boredom vanishing in a hurry. "So that's it, eh?" he growled. "You didn't make the grade with the Sansomes, so you're going to use me to get even."

"You should care," Rita snapped. "I could be tried for murder just for thinking what I'd do about that purring old two-faced, Bible-thumping crook! I'll do more than get even before I'm finished."

"I warned you how it would end, didn't I?" he demanded, his tone gruff and bitter. "Serves you right!"

Rita gave him a withering glance. "Go on, sit there and gloat. I'm not going to coax you to believe that I can help you. I've got several ways of finding what Eli Sansome is doing—and I don't mean from Wick. In a month or two, when you're back in St. Louis reading in the paper about what's happening out here, you'll wish you'd listened to me." She turned toward the door, making a pretense of leaving. Bent stopped her.

"Sit down. If I thought you could be on the level with me for once, I'd listen to you. I know you're smart enough to pick up a lot of information that would be valuable to me. And don't think I'm too good to use it. It's dog eat dog between Clanton and me from here on out."

"Well?" Rita queried haughtily.

Steve pulled a chair up to his desk for her. "I'm willing to be convinced. I'd be a sucker not to listen to what you've got to say."

"Steve, you're having difficulty getting your freight through from the East. It's going to continue if you insist on routing it through St. Louis." She was not repeating or enlarging on anything she had learned from Clanton. Nor was she just using her imagination. In the several weeks that had elapsed since Champ had first written her she had her ear to the ground, and she had a grasp of the situation that would have surprised him.

"That's the sensible way for it to come," Bent said. "I don't intend to route it through the wilds of Iowa and Missouri."

"You will if you want to get it. Steve, the Sansomes are big bondholders in every road into St. Louis. Eli is a director in two or three. If your stuff isn't conveniently 'lost' somewhere in Ohio or Indiana it's an easy matter to do it in the St. Louis yards."

"Good God!" Bent cried. "Why, it's as plain as the nose on your face! I've been running around in circles, tearing my hair, and those pirates have been sitting back grinning at me!" He reached for a blank and dashed off a telegram to Tull. "Believe me, I'll take care of that in a hurry! I'll route the stuff via St. Joel!"

"That's exactly what they've been afraid you would do," Rita said airily. She knew Steve had melted completely.

"Baby, if you can come through like that for me you've come to the right place," he said tensely. "What a sucker I've been! I knew what they were doing to me in the hiring halls, but I never tumbled to this."

"You're going to need men——"

"I'll get 'em in Chicago. That crowd can't stop me."

"Steve, the Vandalia is in trouble. They're laying off men by the hundred. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Mean anything?" Bent jerked himself to his feet. "It's the best news I ever heard!" He tore up the telegram to Phineas Tull. "I'm heading east this afternoon!" He turned to her impulsively. All the hardness was suddenly gone from his voice. "Rita, do you need money?"

She was tempted, but she shrewdly said no. "I didn't come for that, Steve. You go on east. I've taken some rooms at the Pawnee House. I'll be there when you get back."

Bent's eyes clouded. "Have you seen Clanton?" Rita had felt the question coming and was prepared for it.

"This morning at breakfast." She smiled. "You should have seen that poker face of his turn into a question mark. . . . Don't worry about Champ, Steve; I can handle him. He won't get anything out of me. It may be the other way around."

ALTHOUGH Clanton's business in Topeka kept him there longer than he had expected, he knew that Bent had hurriedly departed for the east, and from information reaching him, he rightly concluded that Rita was responsible. Anxious to hear what she had to say, he returned to Pawnee to discover that she had had her rooms done over in his absence: new wallpaper, of her choosing, and new furnishings that reflected a minor elegance. He viewed the changes approvingly. "Amazing," he said. "Quite a St. Louis touch you've given things."

"It's livable," Rita admitted. "I expect you to pay for it, Champ."

Clanton nodded. "That'll be all right. . . . Tell me about Bent. It didn't take you long to unwind him. Why did he rush back to Kansas City?"

"That's just his first stop. He wasn't easy to convince; I had to prove to him that I was out here to help him."

"And?"

"I told him what they were doing to him in St. Louis—why his freight was not coming through."

Clanton's eyes narrowed. "Just what do you mean by that?"

Rita shrugged. "I'm nobody's fool, Champ. The moment you told me the Sansomes were backing you I was able to put two and two together. You don't have to sit there scowling. You can't expect him to bite on a bare hook. Now that he knows, what can he do about it? You'll see to it that his shipments continue to get lost."

Clanton retired into his shell and sat there silently debating the pros and cons of this surprising step with himself. For one thing, he knew he had underestimated her potentialities. "I guess it will be all right," he said at last.

"You just guess it will, eh?" Rita took him up. "It's pulled him away from his job for a week. When he returns I'll get him away again if you'll give me something to feed him. Time is what you're trying to cost him, isn't it?"

"Of course. But you may have helped him more than you hurt him. Now that he knows where the trouble is he may decide that the long way around is the quickest way home and get his freight across the river up at Rock Island and send it down through Iowa to St. Joe. There wouldn't be much we could do to stop him."

Rita looked puzzled and pretended not to understand. "I'm not a railroad man; I wouldn't know about such things."

"I don't expect you to," Champ told her, completely taken in. "I'll take care of that end. We'll play it your way for a while. Your idea of tipping him off to things that he's bound to find out eventually strikes me as a smart piece of business. I'll have something that you can pass on to him in a few days. It will keep him needled up for a week or two."

Bent returned to Camp Number One three days later. He was well pleased with the results of his trip. He had found things exactly as Rita

had presented them. Without thinking twice about it he came into Pawnee that evening to see her.

A beaming Jennie opened the door to him. "Mistuh Steve!" she cried. "It's shore nice to see yuh again, suh!"

Bent looked up to find Rita standing there smiling at him. He had come sooner than she expected, but he did not catch her at a disadvantage. His approving glance assured her of that. She gathered from his manner that things had gone well. "I didn't know you were back. How did it go, Steve?"

"Fine! I'll have men and material rolling across Kansas in a day or two. I fixed things so there won't be any time lost in St. Joe." His glance ran over the room. "Say, this is pretty nice!"

Rita dismissed the compliment lightly. "I don't know how long I'll be here, but I couldn't stand it another day the way it was. Jennie turned one of the bedrooms into a kitchen. She has to make a little alcohol stove do. But the cook permits her to use the hotel kitchen. It's not so bad." She told the black girl to mix up a drink for him. "Sit down somewhere, Steve. I'm anxious to hear what happened. You didn't take it into your head to walk in on Sansome?"

"I felt like it," Bent acknowledged. "But he'll find out quick enough without my telling him that I've put my eggs in another basket. I was only in St. Louis a day or two. I checked up on what you told me about the Vandalia trouble and found you had it straight. I got over there in a hurry. Wait till Clanton sees the gang I hired. Some bohunks among 'em, but most of 'em Irish. They're a wild, hell-roarin' bunch, but they know their business. One of them will do more work than a dozen of these saloon bums I've been getting. . . . It was some favor you did me." He shook his head skeptically. "I can't believe it even now—you doing something for me."

"You know the reason," she said coolly.

"That only makes it funnier. . . . What's Clanton been up to?"

Jennie entered the room, and Rita held her answer until the girl left. It gave it added importance. "There's something happening, Steve. He's been in Topeka for almost a week. He just got back."

"Topeka, eh?" Bent didn't take it too seriously. "My fences are all right over there." Rita refused to have her news dismissed so lightly.

"I hope you're right. Maybe there's nothing to it, but I didn't see any harm trying to find out. I may have something to tell you in a day or two. This is Tuesday; I'd ask you to dinner Thursday if I thought there was any chance you would show up."

Steve considered briefly as he sipped his drink. "I don't know about dinner," he said, "but I'll come in Thursday evening."

"As you please," she murmured carelessly. "I could have Jennie prepare something you like——"

"All right," he decided, "I'll be here. It ought to be safe enough if we have a table between us."

She turned away, her chin tilted at a reproving angle. "If that was

meant to be funny, it was not. Two civilized people ought to be able to see each other occasionally without harking back to the past. Believe me, I have other things on my mind. God knows I wouldn't stay here an hour just for the staying. If I feel that I'm accomplishing something—that will be different. I know the crowd you're fighting; they won't give up, Steve."

"I guess you won't either," Bent muttered. "You're too good a hater for that. I'm in this fight to stay too." His mouth tightened with determination. "I'll put this road through or die trying. I know you're the last person in the world who'd believe it, but I can tell you that I came back from New Mexico with a different slant on what this railroad means. I saw something in the eyes of people out there when I talked to them that knocked a big chunk of larceny out of me. In the beginning all I could see was a chance to make a killing. I knew if I got things started that somebody would try to take it away from me. I never really believed I could build out to the Territory; Tull had no money; the Kansas Central was head over heels in debt. But I knew if I could put up a good fight that Clanton or someone else would make it worth my while to sell out the old man—just as I've been sold out a dozen times—and down in my heart I knew I'd grab it." He shook his head self-accusingly. "Well, they're too late now! I don't care how much money the Sansomes spend or what Clanton does. Let him pour it on. I'm seeing this thing through."

He was back on Thursday evening. After that he was often there. He had an excuse for coming, and Rita contrived to make things pleasant. Cautious, sure of herself, she never made the mistake of reaching out for him; she knew that Steve was a faun; he had to do the hunting. Her interest in the game she was playing had become absorbing, but it was her own game, and she was adroit enough to make it appear something quite different to Clanton. He did not question her growing intimacy with Bent. In fact, he congratulated her. But he quite naturally demanded dividends in the way of information.

Rita cocked her head at the question. "I expect to. Why do you ask?"

"I told you I'd have something you could pass on to him in a few days. Well, this will wipe the grin off his face. I wasn't twiddling my thumbs when I was in Topeka. The validity of the Railroad Act is going to be questioned and the whole matter thrown into the courts. And there it will stay until Bent and Tull are ready to cry quits."

He gave her the details—told her exactly what she was to say. She let her surprise cloak her instant alarm. Flattered by his success in breaking through her calm, Clanton said more than he intended. She encouraged him, and before he left she had a complete picture of what impended. It left her in a ferment, and she could not contain herself until Bent arrived. He was later than usual. She admitted him herself. A glance told him something was amiss. "What's wrong?" he demanded at once.

"Steve, you remember my telling you that Clanton was in Topeka while you were gone?" she got out excitedly. "I've just found out what he was up to. The Railroad Act is going to be attacked on constitutional grounds.

The Court of Appeals is going to pass on it —"

"Why, that's crazy!" Bent jested. "The act is all right. Clanton wouldn't have it killed if he could!"

"Of course not! That isn't their game. They know they can hold up your money when you get your forty miles completed. Then I'll tie you up for months. You'll be so busted you'll settle at whatever terms they offer."

Steve's grin faded. "I'll stop this thing before it gets started," he promised. "They can't get away with it."

"Steve, you're too late. This thing is all set, I tell you; the Railroad Act is going to be reviewed. You haven't any corner on bribing politicians; that's a game two can play."

Bent did not doubt for a moment but what her information came from St. Louis. The thought that he might have been double-crossed by the very men he himself had bribed knifed through him and drove the blood from his face. "Who's handling this thing for 'em in Topeka?"

"I don't know."

"Is it Sellars and Webster?"

"If I knew I'd tell you," Rita protested. "Shouting at me won't get you anywhere. You've got to use your head."

"The dirty rats!" he raged. "They timed this right. Just when I figure the dirt's going to begin to fly, this comes up to pull me away. I'll have men and steel here tomorrow or the next day. Thank God I've got a chief engineer who can handle things while I'm away."

"You'll go to Topeka in the morning?"

"I'll go tonight! I ain't waiting a minute! I've got some cards up my sleeve too. Let 'em review the act; I'll get a decision in a hurry, and it'll be in my favor, or I'll tear things wide open and send some damned prominent people to jail!" He clapped on his hat and started for the door, only to turn back. He gave her a searching glance. "Rita—are you sure you've got this straight?"

Her eyes flashed reprovingly. "You're a grateful hound, aren't you? Do you think I dreamed all this?"

Her irritableness and impatience, coming without warning, struck such a familiar note in Bent that he grinned without being aware of it. His face whipped tight suddenly, and he reached out and caught her by the shoulders. "Don't think I'm a louse," he growled. "I appreciate what you've done for me. I'll make it up to you some way."

A babel of voices awakened her late the following morning. A special train had just pulled in. It was swarming with Steve's laborers. A few minutes after it disappeared in the direction of Camp Number One a second train steamed in. Again the men made a wild dash for the saloons in the few minutes at their disposal. That afternoon assorted trainloads of mules, scrapers, steel, and other equipment arrived. Pawnee began to recognize the magnitude of Bent's undertaking. The talking stage was past. Overnight the whole complexion of life seemed to change; Pawnee was no longer just a little frontier town, lost in the vastness of the Kansas prairies. Its mee-

chants, sensing the rich pickings to be gleaned from the construction pay roll, raised their prices, and lots along the main street doubled in value. Before the week was out the first of the sharpers and harpies, who never failed to gather for the kill, drifted in and began to ply their trades.

From Clanton, Rita got a vivid account of what was happening at the camp. She had taken it for granted that work had begun in earnest.

"They can't get out of their own way," Champ told her. "The men are grumbling already. Bent didn't have his commissary organized to feed a big bunch like that; they haven't got tents enough to house the men. Lapham, his chief engineer, knows how to build a railroad, but he can't untangle this mess. It was a smart move, shipping Steve off to Topeka. I hope he stays away a few days longer. There isn't a thing he can do over there. By the time he gets back there won't be much he can do here."

His elation was unmistakable. Rita considered going to Topeka herself and acquainting Steve with what was happening, until she realized that he must be in hourly telegraphic communication with the camp. When the previous day's edition of the *Republican* reached Pawnee that evening she read with sinking heart that the Railroad Act had been attacked and that its fate now rested with the highest court in the state.

Bent returned to Pawnee the following night. It was late. Rita had already retired when Jennie came in to tell her he was there. She started to dress, then changed her mind. "Show him in here, Jennie."

Steve swaggered in, his manner jubilant. "I know it's late," he said. "I wouldn't have busted in on you, only that I knew if I didn't see you tonight it might be four, five days before I got a chance." He sat down on the edge of the bed without giving it a thought. "I've got to hand it to you; you saved my neck for the second time. I suppose you've read the newspapers."

Rita nodded. She knew she made an alluring picture, propped up against her pillows, her hair pulled back from her face so that it did not break the magnificent line of her shoulders. "What are you going to do, Steve? Clanton thinks you're licked. He says things are wrong here and even worse in Topeka."

"Yeah?" Bent laughed sarcastically. "That's what he thinks. Baby, you're going to see what the courts in this state can do when the heat is put on. This decision will be handed down in three or four weeks, and the act will be sustained. . . . Just what did he have to say about things at the railhead?"

"That the men are grumbling—not enough tents—no food——"

"Don't worry," Bent jeered. "Lapham's got things straightened out. They laid four miles of track today. We'll do twice that tomorrow with me back on the job. Ten days from now we'll be in Gallatin. Then Powell—Lower Crossing——"

Rita shook her head. "You know it won't be as easy as all that. Clanton will fight you every mile of the way. The town's full of his roughs and thugs."

"Let him turn loose his wolf," Steve growled. "I'll be ready for him."

She smiled indulgently. "Big words, Steve. They don't mean a thing."

He'll make you a lot of trouble. If one thing fails he'll try something else." She picked up the book she had been reading and set it on the table. She caught him gazing abstractedly at her long, graceful white arms. "You'll continue to make Pawnee your headquarters, of course?"

Bent roused himself. "No, I'll move right along with the work. I ain't going to take my eyes off it if I can help. I've got to get some of the days back that I've lost." Rita sat up stiffly, her eyes clouding.

"Does that mean I'll not be seeing you?" Bent caught the anxiety behind her question but completely misunderstood what prompted it.

"You won't be seeing very much of me. That doesn't mean we can't keep in touch. If something comes up you'll know where to find me. I can't ask you to move out to Powell or Lower Crossing; they're just wide places in the trail. It'll be different when we get to Grande Saline." His glance sharpened. "You intend to see this thing through, don't you?"

Rita ignored the question. "So I should look you up?" Her tone was cutting in its sarcasm. "According to your own words, I've saved your skin twice already. There won't be a third time. Steve—not on those terms."

Bent tried to laugh it off. "I didn't mean it that way. If you want me to come back to Pawnee to see you, I'll come. I know you've got your own ax to grind, but you certainly came through for me. I won't forget it." His hand closed over hers as he started to get to his feet. "I'll be stepping along; tomorrow is going to be a tough day for me."

Rita caught his arm and clung to him. "You don't have to go, Steve. . . . It's late; you couldn't do anything out there tonight."

What she was offering was plain enough. Bent grinned, and not because he was amused. "Baby, I know when I'm well off," he insisted, only to bend down and kiss her.

Rita threw her arms around him and crushed her warm lips against his mouth. There was no answering pressure, no impassioned response. In the shock of it her blood seemed to turn to ice. Words were not necessary; she knew he had rejected her.

She let him go, and Bent straightened up and stood gazing at her with an incredulous look on his face as a strange sense of freedom began to flow through him. He had only had to have her in his arms again to know once and forever that the old shackles were completely broken. Something in Rita's burning, contemptuous eyes warned him that she knew what he was thinking. He tried to find something to say that would gloss things over. He couldn't afford to break with her; she had proven herself too valuable to him. But his ability to carry off any situation failed him dismally for once. Unable to find any words that would help him, he growled a good night and beat an embarrassed retreat.

White with outrage, Rita sprang out of bed. Before she could lay her hands on something to hurl at him he was gone.

"Let him go!" she burst out in her choking anger. "He'll pay for this. . . . Daring to treat me as though I were some cheap little levee trollop that he can say yes or no to as he pleases! He's in love with that child in

La Paz."

The folly of having taken his side against Clanton ate into her like a poisonous acid, and she told herself she must have been mad ever to have considered such a course.

It left her with a trump card, however, and she was shrewd enough to realize it. The information and advice she had given him had proven so accurate and valuable that it was not within reason to believe he would hesitate to follow it again. That would be his mistake, and she resolved that it should be disastrous. In her bitterness she was willing to forget her feud with Eli Sansome. It was Bent she hated. Just getting even with him did not interest her; she wanted to see him crushed, beaten, and she wanted him to know that he could thank her for it.

CHAPTER 14

NEWS of Bent's activities in Kansas did not cause Jephtha Marr to lose his brooding impregnability.

"We could have held him up and made things more difficult when he was out here," he told Gideon, "but I'm convinced we did the right thing in not trying to prevent his leaving."

"He's begun to build, Mr. Marr. The work will go faster and faster."

"That remains to be seen," the big man said doggedly. "Bent is out of the Territory, and that's what I wanted. Judge McCandless writes that the situation isn't as bad for us as it appears. At least I know where certain people stand and who I am to count on for support. . . . How much money do they say he raised?"

"You hear many stories. I figure he got about six hundred thousand dollars in cash and promises. It'll be enough to build forty miles of railroad across the Kansas prairies. He'll have state money then. The Court of Appeals won't hold him up very long."

His ability to think calmly at a time like this and keep a firm hand on the business impressed Gideon. Adversity seemed only to bring out the strength of the man. He had abundant proof of it two weeks later when the *Republican* stated that the Kansas Central and Pacific was now laying between seven and eight miles of track every day.

By the end of September Gallatin had been left behind, and the railhead was approaching Powell. A fever of excitement ran through the Territory. The railroad was on the way! "Nothing can stop it now," said the men who had invested in its stock. But they spoke too soon, for the high court gave no indication of having reached a decision. The subsidies were held up. Injunctions and court orders flew thick and fast about the heads of Phineas Tull and Steve Bent. The road fell behind in meeting its pay roll. The construction crew—now over a thousand men—began to destroy equipment and the very track they had laid a few days back. It was Pawnee all over again, but a hundred times worse.

"Clanton's work," Gideon said.

"Undoubtedly," Jephtha Marr agreed, actually rubbing his hands in his satisfaction. "I know judges can be bribed the same as anyone else, but snow will fly before Bent can move. He's having trouble with his steel again. He can't get deliveries. It's in the St. Louis papers. According to word that I received yesterday, his Paddies are quitting and going back home. It will take him weeks to gather a new crew. Mark my words, it will be spring before that railroad gets out of Powell!"

"And spring will mean mud and floods—tracks and bridges washed out," Skene added grimly. "The man is licked if he waits that long. He's shrewd enough to know it. He'll do something. Bent's a fighter."

"I'm not altogether convinced of that." The big man's tone was suddenly gruff. "He has a woman from St. Louis in Pawnee: Rita Molyneaux, the singer. You have heard of her, no doubt. I have been told that he has seen her repeatedly. I don't pretend to know what their relations are, but according to rumor, they were very intimate in the past." He frowned at having to repeat the tale. "I mention this only because it has been my experience in a fight to the finish that the man with a woman on his mind seldom wins."

Bent's comings and goings were detailed in the newspapers. He was in Topeka and then in Kansas City or rushing back to the end of steel, applying pressure in one place and wheedling a favor in another. As he had boasted to Rita, he forced the Court of Appeals to declare in his behalf within thirty days. With money again available, he drove the work forward, recruiting men to fill the ranks of his depleted grading crew and track gang and shuttling back and forth between the Missouri and the railhead in Tull's private car or on a freight engine in a determined fight for ties and steel.

But the work slowed, and not even his indomitable will could pick it up. The seven and eight miles a day dwindled to one, and as the high cold winds swept down from the Rockies, the ground freezing at night and thawing by day, even one mile was no longer possible. Behind him the unballasted track spread, and trains piled high with material rolled into the ditch. It was not always the fault of construction that engines and cars left the tracks. Fishplate were found missing—removed during the night. Bent knew what it meant. A snarling, unshaven brute, he repaired the damage, posted armed guards, and refused to be stopped.

Gideon rode to Chula Vista and made sure that winter feed for his mules was in the stack. He had twenty wagons hauling copper by now. After each round trip the teams were turned out to pasture and fresh mules put to work. The ranch and the animals were in excellent condition, and he had only praise for young Geronimo Nunez, his *capataz*.

"Ees mule buyer here yesterday," Geronimo told him. "He say you make beezness with heem coupla time. Hees name, he say, ees Pete Knox."

"Knox, ch? Yes, I've done business with him. What he buys is for the army as a rule. We've got some mules to sell. Did he say he'd be back?"

"Si. Mebbe he come today."

Knox did not put in an appearance until the following morning, however. It didn't take him long to state his errand. "I had a look at your stuff when I was here the other day," he said. "What's the price, and how many head can you let me have?"

"I've got a lot of mules," Gideon smiled. "How many do you want?"

"I can handle two hundred. Cash on the barrelhead! If the price——"

"Wait a minute," Skene broke in, and his levity was gone. "Are you wanting these mules for the army, Knox?"

"Well, I'm buying 'em on speculation," was the evasive answer. "I figger I can turn 'em at a profit."

"You wouldn't be buying them for the railroad by any chance?"

The mule buyer's eyes shifted under the sharp drive of the question. "I haven't made any deal with the railroad," he parried. "But I buy mules to sell. If a man will pay me my price I don't figger it's up to me to inquire what he's going to do with 'em."

"I guess that's answer enough," Skene said. "You'll have to do your dealing somewhere else. Bent doesn't get any mules from me."

The following day in La Paz he repeated the conversation to Kiowa. "The shoe must be pinching Bent in three or four places."

"When I came through Grande Saline three days ago they was sayin' that the railroad had reached Powell," the little man grumbled. "Seems like it's gittin' awful close, Gid. They've build a hundred miles."

"And their troubles have just begun," Gideon prophesied. "You take a couple days off, Ki. I want you to take a scout with me through the Superstitions."

"Hunh!" the little man snorted. "We know them mountains backwards. What er we supposed to be lookin' fer?"

"I want to see where a railroad could get through," was the startling answer.

"Why, you know danged well the old trail is the only way," Kiowa declared testily.

"I want to be sure about it," Skene said.

Three days of riding brought him back to La Paz convinced that, short of tunneling through the Superstitions, the centuries-old trail was the only practicable way for a railroad to get through the mountains.

"I don't understand you, Gideon," Jephtha Marr declared as Skene unfolded his plans.

"It's simple enough, Mr. Marr. There's a rich prize here for the railroad if it can only get into the Territory, but they're not going to spend millions tunneling through the Superstitions. If we serve notice on them that the way is blocked it may make them change their plans and head for Denver. I'm not suggesting this move because I believe for a second that the road will ever reach the line on time. I'm just looking ahead—far ahead—the same as Bent has been doing."

In the deepening silence the giant Jephtha carefully weighed the proposi-

tion Skene had put to him.

"I believe you are right," was Marr's verdict. "I own every inch of land the trail crosses. But a right of way can be condemned, and I'd be powerless to prevent it. There is, as you say, room for only one right of way down through Dragoon Pass. Three miles of it! If I get there first I can shut the door on the Kansas Central and Pacific!" He so far forgot himself as to bring his fist down on his table with a resounding bang. "This is the best idea you ever had, Gideon!"

"You can incorporate a railroad company and run a preliminary survey from La Paz through the mountain to Spanish Flats and Ragtown without any fanfare," Skene declared. "Getting a charter from the Assembly may be difficult. Bent's stockholders will fight it, and I miss my guess if the Clanton interests don't come on the run when they hear what is happening."

"Don't worry about the Assembly." The gray eyes were ruthless. "I'll have the judge handle that end of it, and it will be done quickly and without noise. I've got votes enough to do it. I'll have the terms arranged so that I'll have ten years in which to complete the road. Ten years from today the Territory may be ready for a railroad. It will be a simple matter for me to grant myself a right of way across my own land. I'll buy the rest or condemn it. From time to time I'll have a little grading done. It'll make the hauling easier for us. But I'll never lay a rail! The cry will go up that I'm out to shake down the Kansas Central and Pacific; that I had this in mind all the time and opposed Bent for that reason. Well, I've been called hard names before and survived."

It was typical of him not to waste time exploring the details of the surprising step he was about to take. He had made his decision, and in his mind that left nothing to be discussed; the detail would be attended to in due time. With complete detachment he turned from it to what he had to say about the cutoff. "There isn't any reason why we should shoulder full responsibility for keeping North Platte route open," he said. "Majors agrees with me. He is trying to work out an arrangement with Barlow so that their firms will take over the work north of the Arkansas crossing. I expect the deal to be concluded before you leave. If it goes through you can make your headquarters in Grande Saline. That way you can be here in a few days if I should need you."

He left for Santa Fe in the morning. Two days later he was able to write Skene that Barlow and Majors had formally agreed to keep the northern section of the cutoff open. There was no word about the mythical railroad through the Superstitions.

Lavinia had Gideon to dinner the night before he and Kiowa were to leave La Paz. The laughter had gone out of this house, and he felt an unfamiliar sobriety even in old Tomas and Manuelita. It imposed a noticeable reticence in him.

"Gideon, why do you have so little to say?" Lavinia asked without warning. "First Father leaves without saying a word about what is taking him to Santa Fe so hurriedly, and now you are careful to say nothing. I

know you both so well that I couldn't be more positive that something is afoot if I knew all about it. Does it concern Stephen Bent?"

"No," Skene felt it was not an altogether truthful answer. He didn't intend to be drawn out, however. "It's a business move your father is making. If it's successful I know you will be the first to be told."

"I'm not sitting here pining for Stephen Bent. He has very few of the qualities I admire in a man."

"Lavinia, do you mean that?" Skene's lips had never framed a more important question. His heart was in his eyes.

"I certainly do," she answered, only to turn away suddenly, the blood draining out of her cheeks. For years it had been there for her to see, but only now did she realize the truth. "Faithful Gideon!" she thought, helpless, not knowing what to say or which way to turn. She heard him rise and she knew that in another moment there would be words on his lips that couldn't be checked—words that she didn't want to answer. Not daring to believe her eyes, she saw old Tomas enter to announce Spooky Daniels. It was as though she had been delivered by a miracle.

"Show the lieutenant in, Tomas," she said in a fluttery, excited way. "I didn't realize it was so late. Spooky is taking me to the dance at Logan tonight, Gideon. Father felt that I was distressed—as he put it—about something. It was so foolish. I'm going to the dance just to prove it. You—you don't mind my running away from you like this?"

"No," he murmured. "I want you to be happy. That will always be my wish."

The memory of that parting stayed with him as he ranged north of Grande Saline, fighting the first heavy storm of the winter. He kept the wagons rolling and he welcomed the grinding work, for his thoughts were too heavy for company. He knew Lavinia had given him his answer. It was nothing that she had put into words. He was none the less sure of it, however. His dreams had been built around her, and there were moments when he wondered how he could go on, knowing she was not for him.

He was not only without news from La Paz, but for days at a time he lost track of what Bent was doing. Kiowa finally picked up a rumor that the railroad was now ten miles west of Powell.

"He ain't foldin' up the way I figgered he would when this weather hit him," the little man averred. "Er mebbe it's Clanton who's pullin' in his horns."

"Not if I read the man correctly," Skene said flatly. "I don't believe he's letting up on Bent for a minute."

Clanton's activities fully justified that opinion. The labor and mechanical troubles that daily confronted the Kansas Central and Pacific could be traced back to him. But his ambitious plans embraced matters of even greater moment. He knew things were not working out as he had hoped between Rita and Bent. On the rather doubtful chance that she still might be of some use to him he continued to pay her bills.

Though he said no word of what he was thinking, Rita knew she stood

on thin ice. The chance to even matters with Steve had not come. She had seen nothing of him since the night he had left so precipitately. Her position had become so intolerable that she was ready to clutch at any straw that offered. Her thoughts turned to La Paz, and out of her brooding hatred she drew an idea. Clanton was often away from Pawnee for three and four days at a time now. When she saw him next she was ready. Their conversation had not run very far before she said, "You know, Champ, it isn't you and the men you represent whom Steve fears the most. Suppose he does build out the line. If this railroad stops there, where's its revenue going to come from? He's got to go on—to La Paz, Santa Fe. The man who stalks his thoughts night and day is Jephtha Marr."

The observation was so completely in line with the business that had been engaging Clanton's attention for the past week that he could not repress a little start of surprise. "He'll do a lot more worrying about Marr before he's through. What makes you bring it up?"

"Only because I know that the smartest thing you can do is to make a deal with the man—line him up on your side. You'll have to make him concessions, but you can afford to."

Clanton's round little eyes held an amused light. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were reading my mind, Rita. Do you know what Marr and Skene, his right-hand man, have done?"

"Well?" she questioned uneasily.

"Bent knows; there's no reason you shouldn't," Champ said. "They've incorporated a railroad of their own—the New Mexico Shortline—and grabbed the only cheap way of getting down into the Territory." He laughed in his satisfaction.

Rita stared at him, amazed, finding his mirth more surprising than his news. "What's so funny about it?" she demanded. "It'll shut you out as well as Steve."

Clanton shook his head. "Jephtha Marr has agreed to meet me in Grande Saline sometime next week. I promise you, it will be a very important meeting. I want Bent kept out of the way. That's what I'm here to talk to you about. We've got to figure out something that will take him back east for three or four days, and I'm going to put it up to you to see that he goes. Can you suggest something?"

Rita's eagerness to make the most of this opportunity outran her inventiveness. "It will have to be urgent, Champ. The old tricks won't work."

"Naturally. When we settle on something I want you to rush out to Powell and bust in on him with your news. I don't care how he receives you. If your story is good enough he'll listen. The rest will be up to you. I've given this thing a lot of thought and haven't come up with anything that will do. For some reason the bridge across the Missouri keeps popping into my mind. Bent has only leased rights to use it. But it wouldn't look right if it was destroyed. Someone controls the other roads that use it. The cry would go up that he had had the job done to hold up work on the Kansas Central. That would mean the courts again, and Bent would prob-

bly get an extension from the state of Kansas. Bridges just don't burn down by accident."

"Don't they?" Rita demanded, her voice rising with sudden inspiration. What about the *Effie Afton* and that first bridge across the Mississippi at Rock Island? I've heard the story a hundred times of how she steamed up the river, caught afire, and drifted down against the bridge, out of control, and destroyed it. Everybody knew the steamboatmen had done it deliberately, but no one could prove it. Why can't you do the same thing?"

Champ shook his head. "I don't propose to destroy that bridge. Sansome would never stand for it; it's too profitable. Burn it, and he'd have to rebuild it, and in the meantime Bent would ferry his stuff across on flatboats. But your idea is good enough. All I want is a story that will take him bearing back to Kansas City in a hurry. This will do it. Bent's car is in Powell right now. You catch the combination train west in the morning and fill him full of this tale. If you put it up to him right he won't stop to question it."

"Leave it to me, Champ." Rita's tone was confident. "When will I be seeing you again?"

"I can't say. I'm leaving Pawnee this evening. I don't expect to be back inside of ten days. You don't need me on this."

"No." She realized clearly enough that this undoubtedly would be her last chance at Steve. If he hurried back to the Missouri to protect the bridge and no attempt was made to destroy it, he could only conclude that she had either been mistaken in her information or that she had tricked him. It wouldn't take him long to decide which, once he learned that while he was off on his wild-goose chase Clanton had conferred with Jephtha Marr in Grande Saline.

When the combination freight and passenger train pulled out of Pawnee early the next morning she was aboard. The jolting cars seemed just to crawl over the newly laid track. It was only a hundred odd miles to Powell, but the journey consumed half the day.

Sight of Powell sent a shudder through her. By comparison Pawnee was almost metropolitan. Stepping down from the coach, the first person she saw was Bent. The story of what he had been through these past several weeks was clearly stamped on his drawn face. She reveled in his adversity. Her thoughts went winging back to their last meeting, and vengeance became a white-hot flame in her. With simulated concern she cried:

"Steve, you're a disheveled-looking brute! What's happened to you?"

Bent picked up her bags and led the way to the siding on which his car stood.

"Steve, I didn't learn this until last evening. I came at once," Rita began excitedly the moment they were alone. "They're going to strike this time where you least expect it."

"Where?"

"The bridge across the Missouri! They're going to burn it the same way the old *Effie Afton* was used to burn that Rock Island bridge years ago."

"My God!" Bent groaned. He caught himself then. "Why, we don't own that bridge."

"No, Eli Sansome owns it!" She shook her head pityingly. "Do I have to tell you any more? They know you haven't given that bridge a thought. Clanton is keeping you occupied out here, so they don't anticipate any trouble."

Bent's eyes burned in his weary face. "When is this coming off?"

"I can't tell the very day or hour, Steve. But you've got to get back there. Don't leave this to Mr. Tull or one of his assistants."

Bent's shoulders slumped. "I don't know which way to turn. I'm needed here; I've got to go to La Paz. They're ganging up on me down there. Now this." He shook his head desperately. "But you're right; I need that bridge. It's my life line. . . . I'll go."

"When will you leave, Steve?"

"I'll have to go out to the railhead and see Bill Lapham first. He'll have to carry on while I'm gone. It may be midnight before I'm on my way." He eyed her bags. "You ain't thinking of staying in Powell? There isn't a hotel in the place that you'd put your foot in."

"I didn't know whether I'd find you here or not," she replied. "I was prepared to stay if I had to. I couldn't trust my news to the telegraph. Spies everywhere. You know that. When that horrible train of yours gets turned around I'll go back to Pawnee."

"I was going to say that you could wait and go back with me," Steve told her. "But you'd be up all night. You'll only have an hour to wait if you go back on the combination. You can stay here. Gus will make you a sandwich and a pot of tea. When you're ready he'll carry your bags over to the train. I've got a couple of cars of ties going up the road in a few minutes. I'll hop aboard if you don't mind."

She urged him to go. Bent started out. At the door he half turned back, as though he wanted to say something. Deciding against it, he continued on his way.

Rita settled down to wait.

Twenty minutes before her train was due to leave Gus had her aboard. She thanked him and watched him make his way back to Bent's car. A few minutes later she left the train and walked across the street to the stage station. When the westbound stage pulled out she was a passenger.

Night had fallen before she passed the railhead. In the darkness of the swaying coach her eyes burned with a malevolent satisfaction over what she had accomplished. But things were not going quite the way she believed. Bill Lapham, Bent's capable chief engineer, was even then unwittingly spiking her guns.

"We need that bridge, Steve," he argued, "but there isn't a thing you could do to protect it that Tull can't have done. He's got a dozen men in the Kansas City office who can take care of it. During the war the Union navy solved this problem by stretching a chain across a river wherever they thought a bridge was going to be burned. You can't do better

than that. Anchor some scows a few yards upstream and drape your chain across them."

"You can't block navigation," Steve declared. "The government would be after us in a hurry."

"You'll have to keep men out there to lower the chain across the channel when a steamboat wants to pass. That'll be against the law, too, but it'll be months before they can stop you, and it won't matter by then."

Bent nodded. "It sounds all right to me, Bill. But I better tend to it myself. Then I know it'll be done."

Lapham shook his head firmly. They had struck up an enduring friendship in the time they had been together. "You can't do it all; you've got to depend on Tull a little. I need you here, Steve. The job needs you."

The conductor of the construction train that was returning to Powell stuck his head in the door of Lapham's car. "We're waiting for you," he announced.

Steve told him he'd be along in a minute and turned back to Lapham. "You're right, Bill: this is where we're building this railroad, not down in La Paz or back at the Missouri. I'll talk to Tull by telegraph and keep on talking to him until I know he's got that bridge protected. If things go halfway right for a few days I'll slip over to Grande Saline and see what I can get out of Skene about this game old Marr and he are trying to put over on us." He pulled on his heavy leather mittens. "I know Skene's in and out of the place right along. Chances are that I'll get further with him than I would with old Jephtha himself."

"You still planning to use their cutoff to freight in some ties from Colorado?" Bill asked as he walked to the door with him.

"Sure! The contract's been let. They'll howl when they find out, but it's no rarer than the shakedown they're cooking up for me. We need ties, Bill. I can't think of a better way to get 'em."

CHAPTER 15

AFTER AN ABSENCE OF TEN DAYS Gideon Skene walked into the miserable Palace Hotel in Grande Saline, his mood as gray as the day, and got the key to his room. He was shaving when a knock came.

"Come in!" he called. The door swung back and Steve Bent stood there, bundled up in a sheepskin coat, his face thin and haggard-looking.

"I heard you were in and out of Grande Saline," Bent said, closing the door. "I came over from Powell to see you."

"Well, you're seeing me," Skene growled at him. "What are you after this time?"

Gideon stared at him with a hard hostility. Without invitation Steve pulled out a chair and sat down. His clothes looked as though he had not been out of them in days.

His urgent wires to Tull had resulted in every precaution being taken to

safeguard the bridge on the Missouri. Not only had no attempt been made to wreck or burn it, but he was informed from Kansas City that none was likely to be made, since the stage of the river was so low that navigation had been temporarily discontinued. It gave Rita's story an ugly look.

"What's the riddle?" Skene snapped, not bothering to wipe the latex from his face. "What's this trick you're blating about?"

"Oh, don't be like that," Steve said, waving him back. "I'm talking about the New Mexico Shortline. You know that. I see you are down as one of the officers of the corporation."

Gideon realized that the charter must have been granted and the papers filed. That Bent was here to see him even before word came from La Paz was proof enough of how important the Kansas Central and Pacific considered this counterstroke. He wanted to laugh in Bent's face.

"What about it?" he demanded gruffly.

"Well, we've got to have it." Steve shook his head. "I was sap enough to fall for your talk. I actually thought you were opposing me because you didn't want a railroad in the Territory. I might have known you had your price, just as I told Mr. Marr. But I didn't figure you had this trick up your sleeve." He laughed to himself. "It's funny, finding us sleeping in the same bed after all."

"Yeh?" Skene caught him up. "Don't be too sure of that."

"Why, what do you mean?" Steve scoffed. "I know a shakedown when I see it. But you've got us where the hair is short. You get word to Mr. Marr that it's all right. I'll meet him wherever he says, and we can set the price. Payment will have to be in stock of the company."

"I'm afraid you're way ahead of yourself, Bent. You'll never take over that road."

"No? It'll never be worth a dollar to you otherwise. Damn it, man, you know you'll never build a foot of it if you don't make a deal with me."

"Don't be too sure." Gideon was not interested in discussing the matter any further. "If that's what you came over here to see me about you've wasted your time."

His presence had been quickly noted by Clanton's agents. The latter, in his methodical way, had had his thugs and blacklegs planted in Grande Saline for several weeks. A few minutes after Bent walked into the hotel Clanton himself arrived in town. He was not only quickly informed of Steve's presence but that Rita was here also. His tight face was livid with suppressed rage as he walked into the Palace and had a room assigned to him. A few minutes later his fist rapped out a peremptory summons on Rita's door.

Skene and Bent heard it, and they listened unconsciously for the answer. A moment later the door opened down the hall, and they heard an irate feminine voice say: "It isn't necessary to break in, Champ! Nobody's trying to hide from you. Will you come in?"

"That's why I'm here!" Clanton rasped. The iron restraint he practiced had snapped completely. "You've played your last card with me, Rita!"

Bent ripped out an oath as he realized who was speaking. Skene was no

as quick to grasp the situation. The two men faced each other as Rita's door closed.

"Skene, do you know who that dirty snake is?" Steve ground out.

"I think I do," Gideon nodded. "What they've got to say to each other doesn't interest me."

"Well, by God, I'm interested! I'm beginning to understand a few things!"

He reached the door and opened it. The voices in the other room carried to him clearly.

"Of course I didn't know that Steve was here!" Rita's tone was shrill with anger. "It's as big a surprise to me as it was to you. I thought he was back on the Missouri. When I got through talking to him there wasn't any question in his mind about going. He was completely taken in. Don't tell me I sold you out!"

"Your smooth talk doesn't fool me," Clanton returned. "I've been suspicious of you since the day I brought you out to Pawnee. You saw a chance to get even with Sansome and set yourself in with Bent again, and you took it. You played me off against him from the start."

"All right, I did!" Rita acknowledged bitterly. "I did want him back. And what did it get me? It didn't take the contemptible skunk long to prove he didn't want any part of me. You know he walked out on me the night he came back from Topeka. And you think I'd forgive it? You're not that crazy, Champ! You think you want to smash him. Well, what about me? I'm the one who really wants to see him busted. Why else am I here? Wait till this Marr girl and her father arrive. I'll finish Steve Bent with her forever!"

"Not at the expense of my plans!" came Champ's booming answer. "Don't you try to stir out of this room tomorrow morning, you treacherous hellcat! You've scrambled things badly enough for me already. You knew I didn't want Bent within a hundred miles of this town tomorrow. If you'd done as I told you, instead of thinking of how you were going to vent your damned jealous spleen on him, he wouldn't be here. Now you don't get another dollar from me. I'm through with you!"

"Get through!" Rita cried, beside herself. "Who cares?"

Bent had heard enough. His face twisted into a savage, rocky mask; he kicked her door open and marched in on them. "You don't have to explain anything," he ground out. "I caught every word you said. You're a fine pair of bastards, ain't you?"

Rita took a backward step, her eyes wide and fearful. Clanton stood his ground and actually seemed to relish the intrusion. "If you overheard anything that's of value to you, you're welcome to it," he said curtly.

Steve shook his head. "We won't dismiss it like that—not all of it. I've got to congratulate you first on hitting a new low. Turning this dame loose on me ought to tie the record for something, even with you. Sure I walked out on her in Pawnee! I don't like prostitutes, no matter how expensive they are. I was sucker enough to fall for her once—and I paid

through the nose for it—but she couldn't peddle herself to me a second time."

"Oh, you unspeakable beast!" Rita screamed.

"Go on, open your trap again and I'll smack it shut!" Bent threatened. "I've always wanted to slap that face of yours! It ain't your fault I'm here. I'll say that for you; you did your dirty best to get me out of the way." He whirled back on Clanton. "I've lapped up all the trouble you've dished out, and I ain't been stopped. I ain't going to be stopped! I'll see Marr when he gets here. I'll call your bluff. You ain't buying any right of way down in the Territory until you're sure you've got me licked."

"You talk big, Bent." Clanton's tone was flinty once more. "But you always were inclined to overstate yourself. The New Mexico Shortline is just as interesting to me as it is to you. Before it's sold I'll make an offer, and my terms will be cash, not stock in a railroad that will be bankrupt when the fourth of June rolls around and time runs out on you."

"More bluff!" Steve growled. "If either one of you gets in my way again somebody's wolf is going to get killed!"

Gideon heard him coming down the hall. Bent filled the open doorway a moment later. "You heard it all, Skene. Is there anything you'd like to have me add to it?"

"Not a thing," Gideon returned. "But just to keep the record straight, I didn't know Mr. Marr was due tomorrow. You can believe that if you care to."

"Sure. . . . Sure I believe it," Steve muttered. "And there's damned few people I do believe any more."

That evening at supper Kiowa was full of alarms. Skene had given him a frank account of what had happened. "With that pair under the same roof, to say nuthin' about that female, hell's likely to bust loose eny minit. When they heard that the door through the Superstitions had bin shut in their face it shore didn't take 'em long to figger that they didn't hold all the aces."

Saying he was going down the street, he left the hotel. Skene was preparing for bed when the little man came hurrying into the room some hours later, his manner as excited as he ever permitted it to be.

"Gid, there's half a dozen hard-lookin' gents in this town that I ain't never seen before. If they ain't the same breed of gun-slingin' Texans that yanked Bent out of La Paz that night I'm crazy, by Jasper! That smart Aleck is sittin' in a game with three, four of 'em. If I read the signs right that game is agin' to bust up in gunplay."

"Where are they playing?"

"The Rocky Mountain Saloon."

Skene began to pull on his boots. "We'll drift down there," he said.

"Why?" Kiowa demanded. "It ain't yore fight. You saved his skin once. You don't have to make a business of it. From what I can gather, you ain't got no reason to do him a favor, and I ain't thinkin' of the railroad."

They found the saloon half filled. A few men stood at the bar; another

group watched the game. Bent was playing recklessly. He had been drinking some. He scowled when he saw Gideon. The other players glanced at him with an obscure interest. Their lean, hard-bitten faces were no riddle to Skene. He had not watched the play five minutes before he decided that it did not hold their real interest.

They were playing for modest stakes. Bent won three or four pots in succession. He was raking in another when the man across the table knocked his hand aside. "No wonder you're so damned lucky!" he snarled. "Where did you get that ace of clubs?"

"You dealt it to me," Bent flung back.

"You're a liar! I discarded the ace of clubs myself!" His hand whipped down to his gun, and his companions were just as quick.

"Hold it!" Skene lashed out, the blue nose of his long-barreled Colt covering them. He had seen the dealer slip that fifth ace into the deck. "If there's any shooting here I'll do my share."

The onlookers hurried away from the table. Kiowa had wheeled to face the men lined up at the bar, ready for trouble from that direction. It was suddenly very quiet in this smoke-filled room.

"Take your pot, Bent," Gideon said. "You won it fairly."

"Thanks," Bent muttered. "I'll remember this."

Bent swaggered out.

"You men know who I am," Skene told the four at the table. "This was pretty crude. You tell Clanton that I draw the line at murder."

He was at breakfast the following morning when a curtained mud wagon of the type used by the army rolled up to the door behind a heavy team of six mules. Big Wash Clemmons held the reins. Before Skene could get outside Jeptha Marr had stepped down and turned to assist Lavinia.

"So there you are, Gideon!" was the big man's greeting. "Are we going to be able to get through?"

"I can't say what the conditions are to the east," Skene replied. "The cutoff is open."

"That's the way I am going. I will not patronize this Kansas railroad. I have news for you. I didn't write because I knew I would be here as quickly as a letter could reach you." He turned to Wash and told him to have his breakfast. To Lavinia he said: "We may be here several hours. I'll get a room for you so you can refresh yourself."

"You're looking fine, Gideon," Lavinia said as her father spoke to the hotel clerk. "You've been working hard, I suppose."

"Well, we've had some snow," Skene said with an uneasy smile, expecting Bent or Rita to appear any moment. He doubted that the latter had been dissuaded from her plan to create a scene that would embarrass Lavinia. "How far east are you going?"

"To Chicago for the holidays." Her eyes held his for a moment. "The secret is out," she said. "I understand we have a nice little railroad of our own—on paper, at least."

"So I've been told," Gideon nodded. "Here is your father."

"You can go up now," Mr. Marr told her. "Shall I wait breakfast for you?"

"Please don't," she said. "I may not be down right away."

The big man led the way into the dining room. "Everything went off smoothly," he said. "The New Mexico Shortline has been incorporated and the charter granted."

"I was informed of it last evening," Skene told him.

"Clanton? He's meeting me here."

"Clanton and Bent. They're both here."

Gideon acquainted him with the situation, thinking it best to tell him that Rita Molyneaux was also in the hotel.

"The woman means nothing to us," Mr. Marr said bluntly. "What could she possibly have to say to Lavinia? My daughter is not interested in Bent and his women."

Skene had no desire to pursue the subject. He turned back to the matter of the Shortline. "Both Clanton and Bent seem to feel that it's just a question of money; that you'll do business with them."

Clanton stepped in a moment later and introduced himself. Jephtha invited him to sit down. Skene could see him making his estimate of the man.

"When I wrote you, Mr. Marr," Clanton said, unruffled by that close scrutiny, "I didn't feel free to say too much. We can speak frankly now. I take it that you understand exactly where I fit into the picture."

"Fully."

"It would seem to indicate that some collaboration between us should be possible," Clanton continued. "The move you have just made can turn the tide against Bent if it is used effectively. He is a hard man to stop when he gets the bit in his teeth. His difficulties will continue to multiply, I can assure you. He'll never beat the dead line, but he won't miss it by much unless some way can be found of convincing him that he hasn't a chance. You have it in your power to deal him the knockout blow."

"If you are referring to my right of way," Jephtha said with more than his usual positiveness, "I can tell you that it is not for sale."

Clanton had his answer ready. "I'm not suggesting that you sell it, Mr. Marr. If I thought it could be bought I'd make you an offer and I'd top any price Bent made. But there's no need of going into that. All that's necessary now is to make an arrangement that will convince him that he has definitely lost any chance of ever acquiring that right of way through the Superstition Mountains. It will take the heart out of him, Mr. Marr. He knows that the time limit will never be extended; that I am in a position to block that."

Gideon had listened to this exchange without saying a word. His glance had traveled to the door repeatedly. He could not understand Bent's failure to put in an appearance until he remembered that Lavinia was here in Grande Saline. But even that explanation did not satisfy him. The fate of the Kansas Central and Pacific might be decided at this table. He knew

Clanton had not yet voiced his real purpose in asking for this meeting with Jephtha.

"I don't know what you mean by arrangement," Marr declared. "You misunderstand me if you think there's any chance of my giving you or Bent an option on the New Mexico Shortline. I understand he is in town."

Gideon's eyes fastened on Champ. "Clanton, you wouldn't know, by any chance, what's keeping him away? Your gunmen were all set last night to make sure that he wouldn't be in your way this morning."

"Nonsense." Champ smiled. "Maybe he's drunk—or just being smart. You heard him boast that he'd buy the right of way or know why. That was just so much talk. Steve Bent is too cagey to put himself in a spot where I could run the price up on him." He directed his attention to Jephtha once more as though satisfied that he had disposed of the question. "I know you are well aware, Mr. Marr, that the Kansas Central and Pacific is meeting with continuous opposition. If one delay after another had not been arranged the railroad would be here by now."

The giant Jephtha sat up a little straighter. "Are you asking my approval of your tactics?"

"No," Clanton answered, his button eyes as sharp and opaque as obsidian, "but you don't want to see that opposition stop. It will stop, Mr. Marr, unless you are willing to execute an agreement in my favor giving me priority should you ever decide to sell, lease, or otherwise dispose of the New Mexico Shortline."

Jephtha Marr's head went up, and the gray eyes were suddenly colder than ice. Men were not in the habit of serving their demands on him as bluntly as this. Skene was not prepared to hear him say after only a moment's hesitation: "That arrangement will be satisfactory to me—on one condition: that Bent does not reach the line in time."

A thin-lipped smile touched Clanton's tight face momentarily. "In other words, I am to stop him," he said. "I'll accept that condition. We can find a lawyer across the street and have this paper drawn in a few minutes."

Skene could not remain silent. "Mr. Marr, I don't believe this is the right course to take," he said flatly. It was the first time in his life that he had voiced an objection to Jephtha Marr's expressed will. "You are making yourself morally responsible for whatever this man does. He'll turn his thugs and gunmen loose, and Kansas will be bloody again."

Jephtha Marr thrust out his iron jaw, and the gray eyes struck sparks at this apostasy. But he was more amazed than angry. "Let us not deceive ourselves," he said heavily, getting to his feet. "If one side hires gunmen it will not be long before the other does the same. I'm fighting for my life, and I will not show Bent any mercy, nor you, Clanton, when you take up where he leaves off."

From the hotel office Gideon watched them as they crossed the street. Kiowa ranged up beside him as he stood there.

"By Jasper, I never saw you lookin' so glum," the little man declared. "What's up?"

Skene shook his head. "I don't know, Ki. I don't seem to have the right answer to anything lately. It shakes you up to think you know a man and after ten or twelve years find that you don't know him at all."

Kiowa raised a shocked face. "You don't mean to tell me that Japtha Marr's throwin' in with that two-legged wolf?"

Unnoticed, Lavinia had come down the stairs in time to overhear the question. She held her breath as she waited for Gideon's answer.

"That's what Clanton will read into it," Gideon said. "And he'll make the most of it. I want Bent stopped, but as I said last night, I draw the line at murder."

"Gideon, what are you saying!" Lavinia cried. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help overhearing."

Skene's tight lips twitched, and he dared not meet her eyes. The words had been said, however, and he could not recall them. Kiowa was hardly less ill at ease.

"What has Father done?" Lavinia insisted.

"I'd rather you got it from him," Gideon managed to say. "He doesn't regard it the way I do."

She wasn't satisfied with his answer and she tried again, but Skene refused to say more. Kiowa was equally uncommunicative.

"There's always two ways of lookin' at a thing, Miss Lavinia." The little man sought to reassure her. "One man sees a thing one way and another——"

"Never mind, Kiowa," she cut in. "You only make things worse by talking in circles. I shall get my information from Father, and I shall have it before I leave Grande Saline. I was hungry, but I couldn't eat a mouthful now." She turned to go back to her room, only to stop. "Where have they gone, Gideon?"

"Across the street to see a lawyer."

"A lawyer?" she cried. "So they have made—— Oh!"

Her anguished cry trailed away in a choked whisper. Skene gave her a quick glance and saw that her eyes were torn wide with horror as she stared at the battered, disheveled figure striding up to the door. It was Bent, his hair matted and his face caked with dried blood.

"Stephen! Stephen, what have they done to you?" she cried. She ran to him and threw her arms around him. He blinked at her, and Skene thought for a moment the man was staggering drunk.

"Where are they?" Bent snarled, pushing her away. He had a gun in his fist. "Where is Clanton?"

Gideon took a step toward him. It brought a savage warning to keep back.

"Keep out of my way, Skene! I'll settle this for keeps this time! Are you and Marr hiding that rat?"

"Get hold of yourself," Gideon whipped back. "What happened to you? I got you out of one jam."

"Yeh, and I didn't have sense enough to come back and go to bed. The bunch of 'em jumped me and beat my brains out with a gun. I was locked

up in a shanty when I came to a little while ago." He lurched toward the dining room and had a quick look. "Where in hell are they?" he cried. "I've got to see Jephtha Marr!"

"They're across the street seeing a lawyer, Stephen," Lavinia told him. "You're too late."

Seeing him like this, so bruised and beaten, his eyes burning wildly in his torn face, the fine strength of him so completely spent that his legs threatened to buckle under him, aroused every maternal instinct in her and leveled every barrier she had raised against him. She wanted to protect him, help him, and her pride could not hold her back. Gideon, Kiowa, the clerk were forgotten. With a fierce strength in her young arms she drew him to her.

"My darling, you don't know what you're doing!" she cried. "Lean against me! You've got to go to bed, Stephen. . . . Let me have the gun."

Bent stared at her owlishly for a moment. "No!" he growled, his lips curling away from his teeth. "You'd sell me out same as the others! Get away!" He wrenched free of her and started for the door. "I'm settling my account with Champ Clanton! If your old man has given me the double cross he'll get his too!"

CHAPTER 16

"GIDEON! What are you going to do?" Lavinia cried in stark terror as Skene started for the door, gun in hand. Bent was already stepping off the sidewalk and floundering across the street. "I'm going to stop him." His tone admitted no argument. "He's beyond being reasoned with."

"No!" she cried. "Don't kill him before my eyes!"

Deaf to her plea, Gideon flung the door wide and ran into the street. "Bent!" he yelled. "Throw down that gun or I'll drop you!"

The latter gave no sign that he heard. Lurching forward, he took another uncertain step and suddenly pitched face down in the snow, out cold.

From her window Rita saw Skene pick him up. She knew her moment had arrived. She was at the head of the stairs by the time Gideon staggered in under his heavy load.

"Look at him!" Lavinia gasped, pity and anger striving for mastery in her. "He needs a doctor."

Kiowa tried to lend a hand, but Skene ordered him out of the way. "I can carry him."

Rita chose this moment to run halfway down the stairs. "Steve!" she cried, superbly dramatic in her feigned anxiety. She was actress enough to make the most of this opportunity. "Is he badly hurt?" she demanded. "Bring him up to my room—and send for a doctor, *please!*"

Skene caught a flash of Lavinia's white face as she stared, aghast, at Rita. With diabolic cleverness the latter had accomplished her purpose. Indignation sweeping him, he faced her defiantly. "I'll carry him up to his own room," he got out harshly. "If he wants a doctor he'll have to send for one."

Step aside and let me up!"

The clerk came running and offered to go for help. Rita thanked him and followed Skene up the stairs. Lavinia was waiting for him when he came down.

"Gideon—who is that woman?"

Skene steeled himself to meet her eyes. "Rita Molyneaux."

"Rita Molyneaux? The Rita Molyneaux?"

"Yes."

The name was a very familiar one to Lavinia. Rita had been the favorite *sub rosa* topic of conversation among the young ladies attending the Misses Higby's Female Seminary. They had found it very thrilling. Some had even secretly aped Rita's clothes. Seen through those old memories, the present moment was so unreal and fantastic that she could not believe it. But the cold realization that it was no bad dream that would suddenly fade began to lay icy fingers on her. She understood then; the note of possession in Rita's words was unmistakable.

Skene said, "I'd put this whole thing out of my mind if I were you. Your father will be here in a few minutes, and you'll be leaving Grande Saline. After you go I'll try to get Bent straightened out." He put a protective arm around her.

Clanton and her father returned to the hotel a few minutes later. Their business had been concluded, and neither had anything to say about it. The big man's restraint continued until the moment of his departure. It was as though he recognized that he had raised a barrier between Skene and himself that was not to be easily scaled. At the very last he said, "If the emergency demands it you can reach me by telegraph at the Palmer House in Chicago."

Wash cracked his whip, and the mules broke away. Skene and Kiowa stood there a moment. Finally the little man said unhappily, "I never expected to see the two of you standin' up to each other with a chip on yore shoulder. He's a headstrong man, Gid, and so are you. It's askin' too much to expect you to see everythin' eye to eye."

Clanton came down, paid his bill, and left the hotel, giving them an impersonal nod on the way out. It met with cold hostility from Skene and Kiowa.

"Got the rabbit in the bag, he figgers," the little man snorted as he watched Champ make his way to the livery barn.

The doctor had been upstairs with Bent some time. Gideon stopped him on his way out. "Nothing wrong with him, is there?" he asked.

"I patched up his face a little and put him to bed. He'll be all right——"

"Is he alone?"

The doctor nodded. "Some woman tried to come in, but he ran her out." He grinned. "Good-looker."

Bent had recovered his wits. He was completely unaware of what Rita had done, but he remembered clearly enough how he had conducted himself. It threw him into a brooding, snarling temper. "Rita—Clanton—and now this!" he muttered fiercely. "I couldn't have done worse if I'd tried to

kick everything away!"

Disastrous as he felt Clanton's deal with Jephtha Marr would prove to be for him, Lavinia was uppermost in his mind. If he could see her before she left—humble himself to her, try to explain—maybe she would see it his way a little. As he kicked back the covers and reached for his clothes Skene walked into the room.

"Get back into bed," Gideon told him. "What were you thinking of doing?"

"I've got to see her before she leaves, Skene! I can't let her go like this!" He saw that the other did not understand. "Lavinia, I mean!"

"They left half an hour ago." Gideon's eyes were frosty. "She had some memories to take away that she won't forget. Your friend Rita made her appearance as I carried you into the hotel." He related what had happened, and his telling left nothing to Bent's imagination.

"My God, Skene, you know that dame doesn't mean a thing to me—hasn't for months! Couldn't you have told Lavinia?"

Gideon said no. "This is one of those things that can't be explained to most women. They've got to find out for themselves." He stood looking down at Bent, his manner unrelenting. "I wish you were in shape to take another licking. You'd sure get it for what you said to her."

"Why don't you sock me?" Steve growled. "I was a cur; I know it. I've always been a roughneck. But that's me! If someone means something to me I'll manage to go out of my way to slap their ears down." He condemned himself with a bitter curse. "Skene, I love that girl! She's all I ever wanted to find in a woman. But God help her! If she knew what she was doing she wouldn't wipe her feet on me. You're the man she ought to have. I knew that the first time I laid eyes on you."

"I'm afraid that's all been decided," Skene got out stonily. "Clanton's left town. The sooner you're able to do likewise, the better I'll like it."

Bent studied him a moment. "What was the deal Jephtha Marr made with that rat?"

Skene had no scruples against telling him. It made Steve sit up.

"The dirty crooks!" he raged. "Playing into each other's hand, thinking they were nailing my hide to the barn door! I'll show 'em! I'll put the road through with time to spare! I haven't been asleep. I've some plans of my own. I'll have ties and I'll have steel!"

He fell back, cursing Jephtha Marr and Clanton.

"You've thrown it up to me that I bribed my way through the Kansas legislature," he burst out. "Well, how do you think Marr got his charter through the territorial Assembly? I've turned some sharp corners in my time, but I never made a move that old coyote wouldn't top if it was to his advantage! I heard how he got his start. He talks soft, but he ain't changed his ways. If you see something you want, grab it! And to hell with the other fellow. That's always been his rule, and it's mine too."

"And in the end what will it get you?" Skene muttered.

"It'll get this railroad to California someday and give a couple hundred

people a new chance in life! Sneer if you want to!" Bent cried. "Sure, I'll get mine out of it! But that'll be a drop in the bucket, and long after I'm forgotten the railroad will be there, serving people. . . . Tell me this: was that idea of grabbing a right of way through the Superstition Mountains your idea or Marr's?"

"It was mine," Skene admitted.

"I thought so," Steve said raspingly. He was silent for a long moment. "What a pair we'd make, Gid!" He shook his head at some secret thought. "You'd put the brakes on me when we hit the curves. Nothing could stop us!"

Skene dismissed it with a scornful laugh. "If you figure that's a compliment forget it," he grumbled, getting to his feet. "I'll play my own hand."

Bent left Grande Saline the following morning. Kiowa saw him go. "You can be agin' that gent, but there's somethin' about him you got to admire."

Gideon was shocked to discover that he was thinking the same thing.

The weather held cold and clear for a week.

"Too good to last," Kiowa prophesied pessimistically. "It's jest storin' up trouble fer us."

They got their first intimation of what was to come several mornings later. The wagons continued to roll north, but it was noon before the first teams pulled into Grande Saline on the way south. "Been snowin' fer ten hours north of the Arkansasaw," a boss skinner told them. "Reckon we'll be the last to git through."

Some snow fell in Grande Saline that afternoon. Skene was congratulating himself on the fact that they were apparently getting only the tail end of the storm when a messenger arrived from Russell, Majors and Waddell's superintendent at Arkansas Crossing with an urgent call for help. The trail was blocked; not a wheel was turning. Gathering his men, Skene started north at once.

For three days they fought the drifts before the wagons began to move again. Gideon returned to the Arkansas River station and slept for eighteen hours. He was preparing to return to Grande Saline when Alexander Majors walked into the little office. He had come down from North Platte. He was a mild-mannered little man with more of the look of a preacher than the West's biggest freighter.

"I'm afraid we are in for a severe winter," he said with his usual gravity. "It's very discouraging, Mr. Skene; very discouraging. Here it is with December only half gone and the cutoff already blocked for two and three days at a time. I gave Mr. Marr my word that I would see it through, so do not think I am quitting, but it's only throwing good money after bad. There's no stopping the railroad. I've been in Kansas City and St. Louis recently, and the general opinion is that it must be built. Who builds it is not so important."

Skene knew this was no lightly considered statement. The Union Pacific had dealt the old firm a staggering blow. Now the Kansas Central and Pacific was threatening to close its last avenue of profit.

"The good days are gone, Mr. Skene," Majors continued. "The time is not far away when you will not see a wagon sheet flapping on any of the old trade routes. We've had our day and it's about over." He stroked his beard with a thoughtful hand. His large eyes were filled with a deep, sad regret. "The people want the railroads, Mr. Skene. The few of us who know it means the end of our business oppose them. But we will be brushed aside. . . . I understand Mr. Marr is east."

"Chicago," Gideon told him.

"It will give him an opportunity to catch the pulse of the country."

When Gideon left him to ride south he was in a sober, chastened mood. Kiowa flicked a glance at him. "Old Alex musta thrown the whole Book at you," he observed with a chuckle.

"He gave me something to think about," Skene replied. "He's of the opinion that the railroad won't be stopped. In his words, you won't see a bull team or mule outfit on the trails in a few months."

"Hunh!" Kiowa snorted. "Alex Majors is an old man."

"He stands to lose a fortune. For forty years he has been one of the most farsighted men on the frontier."

"By Jasper, Gid, you don't mean to say you believe him!" The little man's voice had a shrill ring.

"I don't want to believe him," Skene said soberly. "But I know he was right about one thing. There's no sense denying it, Ki. The only men opposing the railroad are those who stand to lose their money or their jobs—cowmen who know it means a fenced-off country and the end of free range; the big freighters, and the men who work for them. As Bent said in Santa Fe—and Mr. Majors again today—the majority of the people want it."

They returned to Grande Saline to find that Rita was still there. Two days later news filtered west that guns had blazed at the railhead and that Bent had appealed for military protection. Skene thought he caught a direct echo of it when at least a dozen notorious characters from the Territory drifted into town. He located them in the Rocky Mountain Saloon. One of them, Chalk Ollinger, was no stranger to him. "I suppose you're joining up with Claflon's Texans," he observed.

"No, we hired out to Bent," Ollinger told him. "Top pay for this kinda work."

"That so?" Gideon said, not as surprised as he pretended. "According to the talk, he could have used you boys a day or two ago."

"That ain't part of our game, Skene. We got orders to stick here in Grande Saline."

What purpose they were to serve in Grande Saline remained a puzzle to Skene until Kiowa burst in on him several days later with the answer.

"Gid, the railroad is freightin' in ties from Colorado! They're usin' the cutoff. Ollinger and his bunch are here to see that no one interferes." He was aflame with indignation. "By Jasper, I call that good! Us keepin' Marr's Cutoff open for Bent to use! It's the biggest piece of gall I ever heard tell of!"

Skene went to the window and watched the heavily laden bull train moving down the street. His face was rocky when he turned away.

"What are we goin' to do about it?" Kiowa demanded.

"I'll do whatever Mr. Marr orders. Bent warned me that he had some plans of his own. This, evidently, was what he was talking about. It certainly calls our hand. You get the horses up and we'll start for Powell as soon as we've eaten. I'll get in touch with Mr. Marr by telegraph."

"We'll be gone four, five days," the little man reminded him. "What if a storm ties things up while we're away?"

"I don't think that's important now," Skene told him. "I believe I know what Mr. Marr's answer will be."

They used the old train. Not a mile of it but held some memory for them—raid, breakdown, or night camp. Seeing it after six months dried up speech in them. The wagons had almost disappeared from it. Otherwise it had not changed a hair. In fact, they were twenty miles east of Lower Crossing before they saw a surveyor's stake. After that a hard day's riding brought them to graded roadbed. Scrapers and a gang of pick-and-shovel men fought the frozen ground under the protection of a company of Kansas militia.

The guardsmen, mostly farm boys from the eastern counties, were an unhappy-looking lot who plainly wished themselves back home.

This was broken country, necessitating one fill after another. "Wait till the thaws set in," Kiowa remarked. "A good part of this work will have to be done over."

Gideon nodded. "Imagine Bent knows it, but he can't afford to wait. It will hold up long enough for him to lay tracks so he can move his material west."

Before the short day drew to a close they saw smoke on the horizon. It was being belched forth from the funnel-shaped stack of a locomotive that was cautiously shunting a string of laden flatcars over the snaky track to the end of steel. Kiowa glared at the offending iron horse.

"There she is!" he grunted. "Twelve, thirteen miles west of Powell already! Spittin' smoke just as though it belonged here!"

Skene's mouth had straightened in a grim line, and he had nothing to say, but the sight of this locomotive trundling over the prairie two hundred miles and more west of Pawnee affected him as strongly as it did Kiowa.

Bent had an army of laborers here. The cold knifed through them, and they moved slowly, their faces whipped raw by the freezing wind. Militiamen, shivering in their shoddy blue overcoats, huddled around fires of brush and buffalo chips.

Night was dropping its quick blanket over the prairie as they rode past the traveling tent city that was Bent's main camp. It looked cold and wind-swept. Out of the growing darkness a man loomed up ahead of them. "State your business," he called out, fingering a rifle.

"By whose order?" Skene asked.

"By Bent's order—the general manager of this railroad," was the sullen

answer.

"You tell Bent to go chase himself!" Kiowa rasped. "I been travelin' this rail since before you was born! Nobody was demandin' my business of me then, and by Jasper, they ain't doin' it now!"

"We're going to Powell," Skene spoke up.

"Then swing wide of the camp," the man said.

Powell was no longer just a wide place in the trail, with the stage station, a store, and the usual assortment of saloons. A hundred flimsy shacks had been run up. Stores had been erected.

A boxcar still did duty as the temporary station. Bent's car stood on a few spur of track a few yards beyond. Skene eyed it with some misgiving. He had no desire to run into Steve.

The operator shook his head when he read the telegram Gideon handed him. "This is a railroad wire," he said. "I won't send this without Mr. Bent's okay."

"You'd better send it," Skene insisted. "Under the law you are compelled to do so."

They were arguing when Bent walked in. "Well, what are you doing in my town?" he asked lightly.

"I'm trying to send a telegram, and your operator refuses to take it."

Steve read the wire to Jephtha Marr. "Send it," he said. "Why not? Jephtha Marr doesn't own the cutoff. I'm willing to hold up my end of the expense of keeping it open."

"We'll see what Mr. Marr has to say," Skene answered him. "Will there be any question about my getting his reply to this telegram?"

"Not a question, Gid." Steve grinned. "I'll deliver it to you myself. . . . Where are you going to get a bed in this town? You'd better bunk in the car with me."

Gideon shook his head. "Thanks just the same," he said coolly, "but I have a friend or two in this town."

The stage agent took Kiowa and him in for the night. They walked down the street after a late supper. To their surprise big Matt Brannigan stepped up to them. "Well, if it ain't you, Skene," he said. "And the little runt! Is it Champ yer lookin' fer?"

"No," Skene told him.

"That's good. He won't be back fer three days." He lowered his voice confidentially. "Champ has dropped a bug in me ear about how things and between us, Skene. You needn't worry; I've got a bunch of lads here at Powell thinkin' up headaches fer Mr. Steve Bent."

Kiowa began to bristle, and by the time Brannigan left them he was humping at the bit. "Why, the dirty scum, thinkin' we'd eat out of the same dish with him! I ain't fergettin' Slick."

"Brannigan's friendliness doesn't surprise me," Skene said. "I told you Stanton would make the most of the bargain he drove with Mr. Marr. It won't end here."

He was at breakfast with Kiowa when Bent came in search of him. Steve's

affability had fled completely. "Here's your wire," he said roughly.

Gideon gave him a glance. "I suppose you've read it," he said.

"Sure!" Bent acknowledged boldly. "It concerns me. Marr's crazy! I must have sunk fifty thousand dollars in the cutoff. Now he's telling you to give it up."

Skene read the telegram. It was exactly what he expected. "That's going to leave it all to you, Bent," he said thinly. "You can keep it open."

Steve shook his head, and the arrogance seemed to run out of him for a moment. "I can't do it, Gid. I can't spare the men. I haven't even got the right kind of men for that job." He was angry then. "What a rotten stab in the back!"

"Stab in the back?" Skene caught him up. "Did you have the brass to think you could move in on us that way and make us like it? Maybe this will make you realize that there are some things that even you can't get away with."

Steve glared at him angrily. "Don't waste your sympathy on me! I'll try something else!" He marched out of the restaurant growling to himself.

Kiowa couldn't control his curiosity any longer. "What did Mr. Marr say Gid?"

"He says to release Majors from his promise, destroy the stations, and move every mule and wagon back to La Paz."

"Well, I'll be everlastin'ly tied and be damned!" the little man cried, eyes popping with amazement. "That's tellin' him!"

"Yeh," Skene agreed. His blue eyes were bleak, and they seemed to be seeing something far removed from Powell. Back to him came what Major had said, and he was moved to repeat the man's words: "In just a short time you won't see a wagon sheet flapping on any of the old trade routes." He shook his head. "That seems to say it."

Kiowa's hard-bitten face went white. "Gid, what's ailin' you? What does it mean?"

"It means we're quitting Kansas for good."

CHAPTER 17

JEPHIA MARR came storming down from North Platte before the station at Arkansas Crossing was completely demolished, and the fact that Lavini was there to hear imposed no handicap on him when he addressed himself to Gideon.

"I used my energy and money to open this route for just one purpose—to avoid having anything to do with the Kansas Central and Pacific," he said in his white-lipped fury. "To have it serve the purpose of the very man I'm fighting is unthinkable! We're retiring to La Paz, but Bent better not make the mistake of regarding it as a retreat. I've just begun to fight!"

In his present mood he was as dangerous and implacable as a wounded grizzly.

"Does closing the cutoff mean that we are going back to the old trail?" Skene asked.

"It does not!" was the flat answer. "If Bent thinks he can whipsaw me that way he's mistaken! I don't question but what he had that in mind; that I'd either be forced to keep the North Platt route open or be compelled to send my wagons to Powell. Well, I'll have none of it! If Alex Majors wants to freight to the railhead that's his privilege, but no wagon of mine will cross into Kansas. They'll stand in the yard in La Paz and rot before I'll permit it!"

Skene had never thought to pity this strong, iron-willed giant, but there was something pathetic in the stubborn folly of what the man was suggesting now. That he could deceive himself with the idea, even for a moment, that by hauling only as far north as Ragtown, just inside the New Mexican line, he wouldn't be doing business with the railroad was nothing short of incredible. The freight that was dumped in Ragtown would be picked up by Majors or some other freighter and carted to Powell. Marr's wagons would have to return empty or accept freight that had reached western Kansas via the Kansas Central and Pacific.

Gideon said, "It's a drastic step to take six months before we know whether the railroad is to be completed or not. It will be bad enough to have Bent put us out of business; to do it ourselves seems to be going pretty far. Our livestock will eat its head off and not make a penny for us."

"Temporarily," the big man snapped. "If I agreed with Majors that our finish is in sight, I wouldn't suggest it. But I don't! Not for a second! Banks are failing in the East; money is getting tight. There are labor troubles right and left—men out of work. If a panic comes the railroad will feel it. Prairie land at a dollar and a quarter an acre will go begging. You'll see construction stop, whether it's being done with state money or private capital. In the meantime I'll do everything I can to disrupt Bent's plans and hold his profits down."

Lavinia saw Gideon start to reply, then change his mind. The hard set of his mouth did not escape her. He and her father had differed at their last meeting, and the feeling grew on her that the gulf between them had widened. The two men spoke about the work.

"Burn what you can't cart off with you," Jephtha Marr ordered. "I don't want a thing left. The cutoff will always be here. Someday we'll use it again."

Lavinia saw something touch Skene's face momentarily that said he thought otherwise. He came over to her then. They spoke about Chicago and the trip east. She did not mention Bent's name, and when he chanced to refer to Steve she quickly turned the conversation. Skene noticed and wondered.

The exodus from Kansas began three days later. By the time Skene led the long column into Grande Saline every wheel Jephtha Marr owned along the cutoff was moving south. Chalk Ollinger and his fellow desperadoes

lined up to see the caravan pass. Ollinger waved a hand.

"We figgered you'd put up a fight, Gid," he called. "Yuh aimin' to do us out of a job?"

"No, we're going to let you shovel your own snow," Skene answered.

The town was behind them before Kiowa spoke. "Seems like we're takin' it on the chin purty reg'lar," he grumbled. "I saw a picture onct of Napoleon retreatin' from Roosha. Reminds me of it."

"We're not retreating, Mr. Marr says—just retiring," Skene murmured.

"Yeh?" Kiowa snorted. What he thought about it he was unwilling to put into words.

Through Ragtown and on through Spanish Flats and Apache Wells they passed, and men and women watched. In the eyes of the Mexican *gente* Skene saw a puzzled look. It was as though they accepted this withdrawal as a defeat for Jephtha Marr and couldn't quite understand it after all these years of believing in his immunity to failure. He caught an echo of this loss of prestige even in La Paz. But La Paz was still Marr's town, and those who shook their heads over this setback were quick to express their faith in his final victory.

Out in the Territory it was different. Skene made a hurried trip to the copper country, down in the Mimbres Range. There and in Socorro and the Lincoln County towns the news that Jephtha Marr had withdrawn from Kansas was hailed as the handwriting on the wall. There was feeling against him, bitter and personal. His projected New Mexico Shortline was just a move to block the railroad from the East, men said. If he intended to build it, why didn't he do something about it?

"What they are saying interests me, but I shall not be swayed by it," the giant Jephtha declared when Skene reported his findings. "Some grading can be done in the canyon. It will keep the men occupied."

It was only another way of saying that there was little else for them to do these days. Some freighting was being done to Ragtown, but wagons by the hundred stood idle in the great yard, and the corrals were filled with mules and oxen that appeared puzzled by this unexpected release from work.

The survey was run north as far as Spanish Flats. In the canyon some blasting and a little grading were done. It fooled some people, but Gideon had the feeling that the men who did the work knew it was only an empty gesture.

With January inching along the stage began to run later and later. The full force of the prairie winter was striking western Kansas, and not even Bent was able to dispute its authority. To add to his difficulties a fire of mysterious origin destroyed his camp, taking the lives of an undetermined number of men. The new Powell *Clarion* printed a long list of the injured. The fire had been followed by three days of violence that the militia had been unable to stem. Bent's men, suspecting that the blaze had been set by hoodlums in the pay of interests inimical to the railroad company, the *Clarion* said, had marched into town and strung up two of the suspects.

to a telegraph pole. They had been fired on in turn, and the battle had continued until military reinforcements arrived from Leavenworth and Topeka.

Skene agreed with Kiowa when the little man said, "Brannigan's work—or Clanton's, if you want to put it that way."

"It's only a sample of what's to come, Ki. Clanton's playing for a double stake now."

Kiowa gave him a glance. "You ain't tryin' to tell me that Mr. Marr had anythin' to do with this, are you?"

"Only to the extent that he raised the price on stopping Bent." Skene weighed his words carefully. "I ought to be the last person in the world to insist on Bent getting a square deal. But if he can't be stopped by outsmarting him or in a legitimate, out-in-the-open fight, he deserves to win."

"Well, them's fine sentiments, comin' from you," the little man grunted. "Sounds like you're on the wrong side of the fence in this scrap."

"I'm right where I want to be," Skene answered, "but I'd like to see my side of the fence kept clean."

He encountered Jephtha Marr in the bank later in the day. The other's only comment on the news from Kansas was that the work had stopped; that it might be weeks before it was resumed. His satisfaction was obvious, and he disdained to offer any apology for the methods being employed. Gideon had even less to say. He felt the gray eyes follow him as he left the bank, and he knew his loyalty was being questioned.

Gideon saw Lavinia for a few minutes that evening. He knew she was fully aware of what had happened in Powell, but she made no reference to it. Spooky Daniels had come up from Logan. He had been wearing a path to the big house of late. Laughing, lighthearted, he appeared not to have a care in the world. Lavinia was gay too. Skene felt it was a forced gaiety; that she was driving herself to keep Bent out of her mind.

Clara McCandless came several days later to return Lavinia's visit. It meant parties and more coming and going from Logan. Lavinia's laughter became sharper and more frequent. But Gideon was not fooled by it. He knew she was trying to run away from herself. His own unrest became something to reckon with. In the past the lazy days in La Paz had run together in a pleasant skein. Now he had the feeling that events were marching on him and that he was only making time.

He knew that work had been resumed on the railroad. Bent was claiming that he would be in Lower Crossing by the first of March. The weather had turned in his favor, and the financial crisis in the East seemed less acute. The giant Jephtha had nothing to say, but Gideon saw him walking in the wagon yard in the evenings, his head bowed as he communed with himself. Never before had Skene seen that proud head lowered, but in the face of these stilled wheels and long lines of silent, gaping wagons the man's fighting heart seemed to falter.

With the first sign of spring mules and oxen were turned out on the

range. Gideon returned from Chula Vista when the work was done to learn that the Kansas Central and Pacific had reached Lower Crossing. Bent had accomplished the impossible again. He had almost paid for it with his life, however, for the night before the ceremonies were to be held in the Crossing his flag-draped car had been blown up as it stood on the spur in Powell. The extent of his injuries had not yet been determined.

Gideon's first thought was of Lavinia. He could imagine her anxiety. He could see it sweeping away every barrier she had raised against Bent. Somehow it was what he wished. He didn't try to explain it to himself. He knew beyond doubt that she loved Stephen Bent. It seemed to be all that mattered.

Skene didn't have to ask himself what her father's reaction would be to this latest news from the north. In Jephtha Marr's mind this attempt on Bent's life would pale into insignificance beside the fact that the railroad had reached Lower Crossing. It meant that the Kansas Central and Pacific had ninety days left in which to reach the line, now only one hundred and seventy miles away. Once it was out of the sand hills its difficulties would be over, as far as the country through which it was building was concerned.

Fat Josefa, Skene's housekeeper, waddled in to tell him that Lieutenant Daniels was at the door. He told her to show the lieutenant in.

Spooky was visibly excited. "I took a chance in finding you here, Gid," he said. "I've got the most important news of my life for you. This evening I asked Lavinia to marry me, and she accepted."

Skene stared at him incredulously.

"Oh, I know it's a surprise," Spooky declared boyishly. "I was afraid at one time that I was treading on your toes, Gid, but I'm glad there wasn't anything to that. . . . Well, aren't you going to congratulate me?"

"Sure," Skene murmured, weathering the shock of it. "I'm having a little trouble getting my bearings. . . . Does Mr. Marr know about this?"

"Not yet. I believe he went to Capistrano this afternoon. We're not going to announce the engagement for a few weeks."

Skene had himself quickly in hand. His tanned face was an emotionless mask. He let Daniels talk himself out. "Are you on your way back to Logan now?" he asked.

"Yes," Spooky replied, "and I've got to be moving right along. Why don't you run up and see Lavinia?"

"I shall," Skene said woodenly. "It's still early."

Lavinia was upstairs when he arrived. She sent Tomas down with word for him to wait. The old Mexican found something in that tight-lipped face that made him cross himself as he went out.

"I hadn't expected to see you this evening, Gideon," Lavinia said as she came down the stairs, cool and self-possessed. He found her lovelier than usual tonight; her long, trailing gown, with its tight bodice, seemed to add inches to her height and give her a regal look. "Father isn't at home."

"Spooky just stopped at the house," Skene broke in. "He tells me you are

to be married."

"Yes," she murmured. Her cheeks seemed to pale, and he sensed the tension that she tried to conceal.

"You know that Steve Bent has been injured, of course."

"I read the account," Lavinia told him. "I am very sorry, but he means nothing to me, Gideon. You'll never find it necessary to remind me again that my loyalty is to Father."

"And am I to understand that you're in love with Spooky Daniels?"

Lavinia looked away. "I'm very fond of Spooky," she said, her lips barely moving.

"But you're not in love with that boy." Gideon's tone was harsh with conviction. "I think you know what you mean to me. I once thought I might find favor in your eyes. The first time I saw you look at Steve Bent I knew I didn't have a chance. . . . You're making a terrible mistake, Lavinia."

She drew back, her face very white, and tried to beat down his unwavering glance. "I never expected to hear you pleading Mr. Bent's case," she said with icy disdain.

"I'm pleading your case—not his. It's your happiness that concerns me. You're not being fair to yourself—or to Spooky, for that matter. You're doing this to hurt Bent, because he hurt you."

"That's not true!" she burst out indignantly. But Skene had not finished.

"If you go through with it you'll regret it all your life. Rita Molyneux will be able to return to St. Louis completely satisfied with her revenge."

"Don't mention that woman's name to me!" Lavinia cried, her bosom rising and falling in her agitation. "I won't be spoken to like this! You've no right——"

"Only the right that my devotion to you gives me," Skene declared with the deepest earnestness. "Maybe what you are doing will bring Bent to his knees—if that's what you want. But I wouldn't count on it."

"I'm not thinking of Stephen Bent," Lavinia insisted. "He has no place in my thoughts."

"Neither has the fact that he's fighting your father," Skene said bluntly. "I was foolish enough at one time to think that might keep you apart. I know better now. If you were to marry Bent tomorrow I could understand it. You've got your life to live; your father can't live it for you. . . . I'll say good night."

Lavinia stood there with a stricken look in her dark eyes, wanting to call him back but not saying a word.

Several days later the Santa Fe paper reported the engagement and said the formal announcement would follow. Gideon wondered if Bent would see it and what he would do if he did. He had his answer before the week was out. In a driving rainstorm, the first of the spring, someone pounded on his door after midnight. He flung it open to find Bent there, his arm in a sling. "So you saw that item?" Skene said, admitting him. "I've rather

been expecting you."

"Is she out of her mind?" Steve demanded, his hot temper boiling up in him.

"I don't know," Gideon said, "but you must be, daring to show your face in La Paz. Your life ain't safe here. You ought to know that."

"Forget it," Bent growled, holding his wet coat up to the open fire of piñon logs. "I've got to see her, Gid! You've got to help me. I don't want to bust into that house like I did the last time, but I will if I have to. . . ."

"Yeh," Skene murmured. "I'm afraid you've had your trip for nothing, Bent. I don't believe she'll see you."

"Well, she will! I'm going to see her tonight. You can arrange it. I've got to be back in Kansas day after tomorrow. I've lost a week already with this arm and shoulder."

The dauntless, unquenchable spirit of the man touched Gideon. He knew at what cost Bent had made this trip, every hour precious to him now. "This is insane. It's after midnight. But I'll do what I can. You come with me. They have a little summerhouse in the garden. I'll leave you there. If she'll see you I'll bring her down."

He supplied Bent with a poncho. With the rain pelting them, they made their way through the narrow streets of La Paz. Due to the storm and the lateness of the hour, there were few people abroad, and Steve went unrecognized. On reaching the house Gideon swung off toward the Rio Concho until he reached the iron gate in the wall which the servants used in going back and forth to the mission. Following a flower-bordered path, they reached the tiny summerhouse.

"Have I got your word that you'll wait here and not try something on your own account?" Skene asked.

"Certainly," Steve assured him. "She'll come quick enough when she knows I'm here."

"Don't let your conceit run away with you," Gideon muttered, moving away in the darkness. Reaching the servants' quarters, he roused Tomas. The old Mexican was sure that Skene was the bearer of bad news. When he had been convinced such was not the case Gideon told him it was urgent that he see Lavinia at once.

"I'll wait here in the kitchen, Tomas," he said. "Be careful not to disturb Mr. Marr."

Lavinia hurried in a few moments later, a mantilla hastily thrown around her shoulders in the Mexican fashion. "Gideon, what is it?" she asked anxiously.

"Steve Bent is here," he told her. "I've got him down in the summerhouse. He insists on seeing you."

"Stephen!" Lavinia cried. "I knew it! I felt sure it was why you were here at this hour." Her manner was eager, excited, and there was a light in her eyes that Skene had not seen there in weeks. "He was not badly hurt?"

"No. He has his arm in a sling. I didn't ask him what was wrong with

it." Seeing her as she was at that moment, he could appreciate what he had lost. And yet he was glad that Bent was here. If he had needed any proof of her deep affection for the man she had given it. He slipped out of his poncho and held it up for her. "If you are ready, Lavinia," he urged.

To his surprise she backed away, and all the eagerness had gone out of her eyes. Her lips had lost their appealing curve, and the set of her mouth was as determined as her father's ever had been. The change was so sudden it was like the lowering of a curtain between the acts of a play. He saw that a struggle went on in her. When she had settled it to her satisfaction she said, "No, I will not see him. He knows he shouldn't have come. What sort of person does he think I am?"

"He came a long way," Skene said soberly, "and at risk of his life, and at a time when all he's fighting for is at stake."

"And I suppose he expected me to fall into his arms," she said with contempt.

"I don't know as to that," Gideon told her, "but be sure he won't come again if you send him away now. I'd be awfully sure of what I did, Lavinia."

"I am sure!" she insisted, her voice so tense Skene would not have recognized it. "If he were the only man in the world for me it would be too late now. I have pledged my word and I shall keep my promise."

"All right," Skene agreed. "There's nothing more I can say."

He started out, thinking she might call him back at the door. She let him go, however, without a word. Bent pounced on him. "Where is she?" he demanded. "Is she coming?"

"No," Skene told him. "She refuses to see you."

"Well, I'll see her whether she wants it or not! I'll crawl on my knees to her if I have to, but I'm not leaving La Paz until I've talked to her!"

"I'll have something to say about that," Gideon warned. "If she doesn't want to see you that's her privilege. You'll get out of here now if I have to drag you out."

Steve thought it over for a moment. "You're right," he growled. "I'm sick of taking it on the chin wherever I turn. She's made her bed: let her lie in it! I wish her luck with her soldier. The next time she sees me in La Paz the bands will be playing and the Governor will be here to shake my hand and tell me what a great guy I am. . . . Come on, let's get out of here!"

Through the driving rain they retraced their way down through La Paz. At the house Skene said, "I'll make you a cup of coffee and fix you up with a fresh horse."

Bent thanked him. He had little to say as he sat with legs stretched out toward the fire. The wear and tear of the past weeks was sharply reflected on his lean face. "I guess we both know what's at the bottom of this," he said as he was preparing to leave. "I never claimed to be any angel. You're a man, Skene; do you hold it against me?"

Gideon said no; he knew the reference was to Rita. "It's not up to me

to pass judgment on such things. You're done with it, and that's the only thing about it that interests me."

"I couldn't ask any more of you," Steve grumbled as they stepped out to the stable. With a muttered "So long!" he swung up into the saddle and headed back to Kansas. Gideon stood there until the night had swallowed him before he returned to the house. He sat staring into the fire for an hour, too engrossed with his thoughts to keep his pipe going. He jumped out of his chair when someone tapped on the window. When he got to the door he found Lavinia there.

"I've got to see him," she cried. "I must have been mad to send him away. I can't fight him any longer, Gideon. I've made a mess of everything. But I can't go on—no matter what happens. Where is he?"

"He's gone."

"Gone?" she gasped, her knees weak.

"He left over an hour ago."

Lavinia groped for a chair and sat there crushed, speechless. Skene winced, seeing her like that and not knowing what to do. It was too late for advice; his sympathy she already had. "I tried so hard to spare you this," he said.

She gave no sign that she heard. Her thoughts were in the rain-swept Superstitions with Bent. If he had been gone an hour he would be climbing the first low hills by now. "He's in no condition to ride," she murmured, hardly aware that she spoke. "But he came. Nothing could keep him away."

It was as though only now she realized its full significance. Gideon could see her drawing courage from it, leaning on it as though it were a physical thing.

"It's late, Lavinia—very late."

"Yes." If her face was pale as she faced him, it was none the less resolute. "Will you take me home, please? And don't look so worried, Gideon. I can go on now, no matter what happens. . . . I know what I mean to Stephen."

CHAPTER 18

THE ARMY CONTRACTS and the freighting to the reservations, always the least profitable part of the business, became its mainstay as spring advanced. Jephtha Marr went to his Cross Rivers ranch for the roundup. In the past his steers had been driven east; this year he was glad to bid on the beef issues to the Apache reservations and the military posts; his wool he could hold over. The big warehouse, redolent with creosote dip, was bursting with his bagged fleeces.

If the big man entertained any doubt about keeping the Kansas Central and Pacific out of the Territory he never voiced it. He came back from Cross Rivers in time to attend the formal announcement of Lavinia's engagement to Lieutenant Daniels. As he had so often done in the past, he

opened his purse strings, and La Paz reveled in a three-day fiesta at his expense.

"Nothing seems to go right," he complained one evening at dinner. Gideon had been an infrequent guest of late. "I'm glad Vinia had the good sense to choose the Daniels boy for a mate. It's a good name, and he'll make her a fine husband."

"I had several letters from the north on the evening stage," Jephtha continued. "The creeks are rising in Kansas. There was a lot of snow in the Colorado mountains this winter. Before it's all gone off Bent will have his hands full. He's already in trouble with the track he laid these past months. The frost has gone out of the ground, and his roadbed is sinking."

"If he's stopping it won't be the weather that will do it," Lavinia observed to Skene's surprise. Her father's frown was rebuke enough, but he was not content with that. "If you are referring to the fact that he will have other difficulties to contend with, I quite agree with you."

"I think you know exactly to what I refer, Father," she said pointedly. The big man grew red in the face. Without waiting for Lavinia to rise from the table he pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

"I have always conducted the business affairs of this family," he observed. "I shall continue to do so. This is no time for halfway measures."

"Or fair play," Skene heard Lavinia murmur under her breath. It made him wonder how long it would be before they came to an open break.

Before a week had passed the floods that Jephtha Marr had predicted were sweeping western Kansas. Bent sought to anchor his trackage in the most dangerous places with long strings of loaded cars. His strategy was successful, except east of the Little Sandy, where eight miles of track disappeared. Other stretches were weakened. The bridge at the Little Sandy did not go out, however. His engineers pronounced it safe, and as soon as the snow-fed creeks had returned to their banks he had gangs of men repairing the damage. The railroad in back of him was truly his life line of supplies now, and he had to have it open. Days were slipping away from him, and when it seemed that he was about ready to renew his assault on the sand hills the Little Sandy bridge plunged into the still-swollen creek. The circumstances were peculiar.

Skene found them no puzzle, and when Jephtha Marr left La Paz for an unannounced destination the morning following receipt of the news he leaped to the conclusion that the other was off to meet Champ Clanton. Lavinia wondered, too, and she was filled with misgiving.

"It will take Stephen weeks to replace that bridge," she said to Gideon as they met outside the bank.

"They seem to have him stopped cold," Skene was compelled to admit.

"And Father condones such things—even supports them. Something seems to drive him. I can't understand it. It's not that he won't be crossed in his will, nor his fears for the business." Her voice trailed away in an unhappy sigh. "I pity him, Gideon. I see a look in his eyes sometimes that

frightens me. It's as though he felt he stood alone.

Skene knew there was more truth than she supposed in her thought. "You see what the railroad has done to us," he said. "It isn't here yet—it may never come—but our lives will never be the same again. The old days are gone; the Great Trail is a thing of the past. Your father won't admit it. He won't realize that the change has come; that it doesn't make any difference whether the Kansas Central ever builds an inch nearer to La Paz. We can shut ourselves up here in the Territory and keep the railroad out, but it won't be enough. . . . It's clearer to me every day."

While Jephtha Marr was away news reached La Paz that there had been serious cave-ins in the sand hills; the railroad cuts had been obliterated, and half a month's work gone for nought. There was evidence that dynamite had been used. It seemed to decide the race against Bent.

The giant Jephtha returned then and sent for Skene at once. Gideon expected to find him in a jubilant mood, but he had no sooner stepped into the office than he discovered his mistake. The big man sat at his long table, his usually immobile face livid with rage. "I understand Bent has been in La Paz recently and that you protected him."

Skene realized instantly that the other had been with Clanton. "So Clanton has his spies here too," he observed grimly.

"It would seem that I would do well to have mine," Jephtha ground out. "You, of all men, to play me false! You've been my right hand. All my faith has been in you. A thousand times you've proven your loyalty to me. What has come over you? What excuse have you to offer?"

"None," Gideon answered, tight-lipped, unflinching.

The door from the banking room opened, and Lavinia stepped into the office.

"I'm busy," her father snapped at her, "If you please——"

His gray eyes blazed as she walked up to the table defiantly.

"I'm afraid it's business that concerns me, Father," she said with as much bluntness as he had ever used. The big man stared at her amazed, even awed for a moment.

"Am I to understand that Bent came here to see you?" he demanded in a voice that filled every corner of the big room.

"Yes."

"What! Are you shameless enough to stand there and tell me that you have had a tryst with that man and engaged to another?"

"I refused to see him," she said with a sharp intake of breath. "I shall regret my decision as long as I live."

The giant Jephtha reared back in his chair, his face swelling with anger and outrage. "What unspeakable folly is this? You compel me to tell you that that man has forfeited his right to your respect. There is a woman——"

"Rita Molyneaux. I know. I've put her out of my mind so completely that she no longer exists. I prefer to think that he has too. You—you better have the truth from me, Father. . . . I love Stephen Bent."

Jeptha Marr's face was as ashen as he stared at her.

"Not that anything will ever come of it," she went on. "It's too late for that. I'll keep my promise to Spooky Daniels—if he'll have me."

But Lavinia had not finished. Gideon saw her draw herself up as though marshaling her courage. "I wish it weren't necessary for me to say this, father. You've always had my utmost respect and affection, but you are pursuing a course now that I can't follow. You insist that you are not responsible for what that man Clanton does, yet you approve every step he takes. I suspect that you may be helping to foot the bill for his activities. Certainly your cowboys have been drifting north ever since the roundup was over. I've heard it said they were bound for Kansas."

"I'll not be called to account for my acts by anyone, least of all by my own daughter!" the big man thundered. "I've heard all I want to hear. Don't ever mention Bent's name to me again. And try to remember your position! I shall have to ask the two of you to leave. I have business——"

"I think we had better settle this now, Mr. Marr," Skene said. "It's not going to be easy for me to pull away from you, but I know it's the only honorable thing to do. I'm not fooling myself about Steve Bent and what his railroad may do to me, but my sympathies are with him. Feeling that way, I don't deserve your confidence any longer."

The giant Jeptha met the blow with a face of stone. When he spoke his voice was rough with feeling. "I've felt this ever since Grande Saline. It comes at an awkward time, but I'm grateful that you at least had the courage to speak frankly. It's never been my way to have an army of doubters at my beck and call. It appears there are some men left who still have faith in me." He got up and walked to the door that led into the bank, his step heavy and measured. "It will take a few days for Wilkinson to cast up our account, but I'll order him to start now."

Skene sat staring at the floor, his eyes bleak. He found it incredible even now that he and Jeptha Marr had come to the parting of the ways. No decision he had ever made had so affected him.

"Gideon," Lavinia murmured.

"I'm sorry it had to be this way," he said with a deep regret. "Your father's word has been my law for a good many years."

"I know. . . . Maybe this was the bravest thing you ever did for him. It may stop him."

Gideon shook his head. "Nothing can stop him now. It's not his way to let go when he's got the enemy on the run. Bent will need a miracle to get him through on time."

"You could help him, Gideon," she startled him by saying. She was only giving voice to something that had been in her mind for days. "He needs mules and men who know how to handle them. There's no work here for the men. They've always boasted of their association with you. It would take only a word and you'd have half a hundred of them ready to follow you anywhere. . . . You've got the mules——"

"No," Skene said without hesitation. "Breaking with your father is one thing; openly opposing him is another."

"Then you're satisfied to stand on the side lines and see this fight decided by such foul means as Clanton is using without doing anything about it? I can't believe it, Gideon. You know it's no longer a question of whether the railroad will be completed by him or not. There isn't a shadow of doubt in your mind but that if Stephen loses Father will find himself engaged in an even more bitter fight with Champ Clanton."

"That hardly needs to be said," Gideon replied. "It's not that that's holding me back."

"I know," Lavinia acknowledged, her resolve unshaken. "Don't think I'm asking you to turn against my father without appreciating what it means. After all, he is my father. But I can be brave too. I know I am right. They're crucifying Stephen. I want to help him. There's no one I can ask but you."

Some of the sternness went out of Skene's face as he gazed at her. He was touched by her fervent appeal for Bent, but what moved him most was her courage, her readiness to stand staunchly by what she thought and not reckon the cost to herself. It confirmed his long judgment of her, and he could not forego putting the pieces of his own shattered dream of her together again for a moment. But though she was irretrievably lost to him, his devotion to her remained as complete as ever, and he knew that neither time nor circumstance would ever alter it.

With the tenseness of his voice betraying his emotion he said, "I've always told myself there never would be anything you could ask of me that I wouldn't do. If you're sure this is what you want I'll do it."

Lavinia suddenly felt very humble in the presence of this plain man. Through misting eyes she gazed at him. "Oh, Gideon, I owe you so much," she murmured. "There'll never be another like you." She went to him and put her arm around him impulsively. "No matter what happens I know I shall always have you," she whispered, her cheek pressed against his.

The moment was almost too much for Skene, and he was glad when Mr. Marr came in a few moments later. "Wilkinson will have your statement ready day after tomorrow. I wish to remind you that control of the New Mexico Shortline remains with me. I shall use it as I see fit."

Skene nodded. "That will be agreeable to me, Mr. Marr. It will be very valuable someday or worth nothing at all."

The gray eyes caught him in their narrowed gaze. "For your benefit, no railroad car will ever go over that right of way. . . . Is it possible for me to ask what your future plans are?"

"I'm going to Kansas, Mr. Marr. I intend to give Bent what help I can."

The giant Jephtha swelled with anger, and from his great height he let Skene feel his withering contempt. "So your treachery goes even that far!" he thundered.

"He's doing it for me, Father!" Lavinia cried. "I asked him to go."

His iron jaw thrust out, the big man glared at them like a tiger at bay. "I shall know how to deal with you!" he warned. Striding to the street door, he flung it open. "Get out—both of you—and don't ever let me see you in my office again!"

CHAPTER 19

SKENE sent word of his decision to Bent. Back came a one-line letter: "Come on! Hurrah for us!"

At Lavinia's request Gideon had said nothing of her part in the step he was taking. She insisted that Steve should never know, but as Skene went about his preparations he could not convince himself that she and Bent could be kept apart forever.

From Chula Vista he sent out his call for men. It was like touching a match to dry prairie grass. In threes and fours they came. Tuss MacWhinney sent his sons. Others came in from the San Andreas hills. There were men from Capistrano and the ranches on the Capistrano Plains. In La Paz big Wash Clemmons bestirred himself. "Ole Mizzoury's goin' to Kansas with Gid!" he bellowed in the cantinas. "Spit on yer hands and git ready to fight if yuh ain't!" When he arrived at Chula Vista his force numbered almost a score—Pike County men, trained skinnners who had cursed the railroad and swore they'd be killed and be damned before they'd have anything to do with it. "We ain't goin' back on our principles," big Wash stated. "We know the trail's done fer, and we figger yuh wouldn't be takin' this yere step unless yuh knew what yuh was doin'."

"All I can promise you is a tight and hard work for a day's wages," Skene told them. "I haven't any trick up my sleeve by which I expect to keep the freighting business going. I'm throwing in with Bent because I like the way he fights. He's been on the floor a dozen times, but he gets up and keeps on swinging. I know I couldn't have better men than you with me. But it's only fair to warn you that if you go north with me you'll never work for Mr. Marr again."

The mules were brought in from the range and the wagons made ready for the long drive. The day before the start was to be made Skene rode into La Paz to put his affairs in order. He had not been in town ten minutes before he ran into Kiowa. The little man had come in from Ragtown with half a dozen wagons the previous evening. That he had heard the news already was evident from his manner.

"I see you know," Gideon said.

Kiowa nodded gloomily. "It hits me awful hard. Mr. Marr don't have nothin' to say. Miss Lavinia never leaves the house. Tomas tells me they barely speak." He shook his head. "I don't know what to make of it. You know that girl is his life. And no man walks this earth who means more to him than you. I'm jist as sure you feel the same about him. . . . What's it goin' to come to, Gid?"

"I can't say. Having made the break, I intend to go all the way. I don't suppose Mr. Marr will be satisfied with any halfway measures either. But he's wrong this time, Ki. You know it."

"He ain't wrong enough fer me to quit him," the little man declared solemnly. "I—I jest couldn't do it, Gid, not even fer you."

"That's all right," Skene said. "I'd never ask you to leave him. I'm going to be in town only an hour. I won't try to see Lavinia. But you'll be seeing her. When you do tell her I said good-by."

He was back at Chula Vista by evening.

"I reckon we're ready to pull away in the mornin'," Wash told him. "It's goin' to be quite a turnout—a cavy of five hundred mules, forty wagons, and up'ards of fifty men."

"And it'll be a job to keep them moving," Gideon said. "We'll strike up east of La Paz and get through the Superstitions by nightfall."

Out in the yard the fires were burning low and the assembled men were turning into their blankets when Skene heard a rapidly driven horse pound up to the house. He thought it was still another recruit, and even when he recognized the shrill voice of Ben Lusk, the old guide with whom he had first ridden the cutoff, he was still of that opinion.

"Where'll I find Skene?" the old man called out.

"Right here, Ben," Gideon answered. "Glad to have you with us. You'll have to bed down in the yard if you can find room."

"Hell and blazes," old Ben screeched. "I ain't joinin' up with yore war party! I'm here with news fer yuh, Gid!"

Skene struck a light and called him inside. "What's your news, Ben?" he asked with quick anxiety as he studied the man's hawklike face.

"It's bad," Ben declared. "When yuh hit the Superstitions tomorrow night yore agoin' to ride into as neat a little jack pot as yuh ever saw. The little Marr gal put it up to me to get word to yuh. Ole Jep has sent Ki Smith down to Cross Rivers to fetch up his cowboys. The sheriff is agoin' to depytize 'em, and then the little greaser is agoin' to lay out with 'em. When yuh show up, Gid, yuh'll be served with a paper."

Skene was well acquainted with Primo Montero, the sheriff. He had never paid him much attention. "What sort of a paper is Montero going to hand me, Ben?"

"Marr's gettin' out in attachment on yore mules. Claims he's got some interest in 'em and he's agoin' to stop yuh from removin' 'em from the Territory."

"That's nonsense," Skene exclaimed. "Are you sure you got this straight?"

"Yo're tootin' I got it straight," the old man cackled. "I ain't had more'n six drinks since daylight. Yuh oughta know that Jep Marr kin git what he wants from the *juez de paz*. This is only a game to hold yuh up. If yuh don't take it peaceful like, the lead's sure agoin' to fly."

Skene's face was tightly drawn in the lamplight. "Did Miss Lavinia say how she found this out?" he asked.

"No, she didn't."

"Well, I won't ride into that trap. I've got about twenty hours in which to move. It's about a hundred and ten miles to the Texas line. I'll get this stuff out of the Territory and beyond the jurisdiction of the court."

"If yuh git started right off yuh may do it," Lusk agreed. "They'll come fast when they start after yuh. Yuh couldn't do better'n follow the Canadian. Jest keep a mite north of the river so yuh won't git tangled up in them willer brakes. But, shucks, yuh know the country as good as me."

"Not many of these men do," Skene said. "I could really make time if I broke the cavvy up into small bunches and was able to put a man in charge who knew where he was. I could use you, Ben."

"Sure! Sure" the old frontiersman agreed. "The little gal made me promise to tag along with yuh. Pull on yore boots now and git yore hombres lined up. I'm agoin' to see what I kin find in yore chuck box."

The news that they were moving at once ran over the yard quickly. The men threw fresh brush on the fires, and in the dancing light the mules that were to be driven to wagon were harnessed; the others were turned out of the corrals.

"You'll be in charge of the first bunch, Wash," Skene told the giant skinner. "I'll have old Ben ranging up along the line to keep you straight in your directions. The boys behind you may be a mile back. Don't worry about 'em; just keep crowding on the leather."

Gideon had a second bunch ready to move by the time Wash had pulled out. Knowing the caliber of the Missouri men, he choose them for his lieutenants. His instructions were simple. "Don't lag behind," he finished. "Bunch up! Look sharp!"

Every few minutes he dispatched a group. It was fully an hour later, however, before the dust began to settle in the yard at Chula Vista. Moving that number of mules by night through open country, after they had run free on the range for five or six weeks, was no light undertaking. Skene knew he would be doing well to average five miles an hour until the animals settled down. He had held Bud MacWhinney and several others back to form a rear guard with himself.

After the late moon turned the night to silver they moved faster. Hour after hour they went on. "We're doing better than I figured," Gideon told young MacWhinney and the others. Shortly after dawn he saw old Ben riding back, his dirty buckskins flapping in the cool morning wind.

"She's agoin' all right," was his greeting. "We oughta be leavin' the river in another hour. We'll have to water the critters afore we do, and ther's agoin' to take time, and we ain't got none to spare. If Jep's crowd smells a mouse they'll be showin' up by noon."

"It's got to be done," Skene told him. "If we don't the loose animals will be breaking back, and we won't save a minute. How far do you figure we've got to go, Ben?"

"Up'ards of seventy mile. And she's agoin' to be hot in another hour or two. It'll shore be high noon before we cut the old Goodnight Trail, down the Arroyo Seco. Er mebbe yuh got a better idear."

"No," Gideon said. "You get back to the head of the line, Ben, and tell the men we're watering. There won't be any time for breakfast."

The sun began to burn as the morning wore on. The leg-weary mules had to be urged along now. Skene glanced over his shoulder at their back trail at more frequent intervals. Another hour or two would decide the issue.

"What you aimin' to do if they overhaul us?" Bud MacWhinney asked.

"They'll have the law with them," Gideon answered, "but I don't intend to be stopped without putting up a fight."

When they had covered another ten miles Ben came riding back again, his long hair flying. Skene had pulled up, his blue eyes focused on a moving dust cloud, no bigger than his hand, far to the rear. Old Ben squinted his faded eyes at it too. "By ginger, they're too late!" he snorted. "I ain't seen no boundary markers, but I figger we're in Texas right now. We shore will be when we hit the arroyo, and we'll be there afore them hombres kin come up."

Gideon rode back with the old man at once. Whips began to crack, and the whole caravan moved faster. By the time he reached the head of the line the first wagons were turning into the old Goodnight Trail. Skene bunched his wagons and ordered the mule herd taken out of range. The men lined up then and waited, ready for an attack if it came.

The sheriff had fully a score of men with him. It gave Skene a stab to see Kiowa there and Frank Childress and both of the Oatwines—men with whom he'd stood for years. They looked none too happy, but he knew better than to count on the past. They were here representing for Jephtha Marr. Montero spoke to them and started to ride up to the wagons.

"That's far enough, Primo," Skene called out. "If you have anything to say to me say it from where you are."

Pudgy little Primo Montero heeded the warning. The record of the years had built up in him an awesome respect for Gideon's ability to finish what he started. "I'm sorry to do this, Gid," he professed, "but I've got an attachment on your mules."

"You'll have to tell Mr. Marr you were too late," Gideon advised. "The man who lays a hand on my mules is a dead man." Big Wash and the others growled their agreement with this and kept their guns cocked.

Montero was impressed, but his job was at stake, and his first concern always had been to keep himself in office.

"You better give it up," Kiowa growled as the other hesitated. "You ain't got a leg to stand on. I told you he'd head fer Texas, but you knew better. We've jest had a long ride fer nothin'."

The little man's slitted eyes were cold and inscrutable in his leathery face. Skene saw Henry Oatwine and Childress regarding him with a stony, obscure interest. He felt some sort of understanding flow between the three men. He knew they had pushed Montero around too long to have any respect for his leadership now. But the answer failed to satisfy Skene, and he was convinced that what went on in their minds had a darker meaning.

Without turning his head Henry Oatwine spoke to Childress, his lips barely moving. Frank's answer was monosyllabic and definite. Skene felt the moment reach its climax, only to see Oatwine turn his pony away. "Come on!" the Cross Rivers man jerked out. Kiowa and Childress swung away with him, and a dozen others followed. Deserted by his own forces without so much as a by-your-leave, Primo flicked a glance at the grim-faced men lined up with Skene and decided that discretion was the better part of valor. Hurriedly stuffing his legal papers into his pocket, he took off after his retreating deputies.

"Wal!" big Wash snorted disgustedly. "Do yuh mean to tell me that's all there is to this?" He snatched off his hat and mopped his perspiring face as he waited to be answered. "Primo don't count, but the rest of that bunch never walked away from a fight before. What's the idear?"

Skene thought old Ben supplied the correct answer when he said: "Ki Smith is smart enough to know that this yere trail dips back into the territory jest east of Spanish Flats. If we make the mistake of stickin' to her we'll find 'em waitin' for us there, an' there'll be some powder burned, I promise yuh."

"That's one mistake we won't make," Gideon declared. "We'll move up the Arroyo Seco a few miles and rest there until evening. When we pull away we'll strike off across the Jornada."

"By Godfrey, that's easier said than done," old Ben asserted. "It ain't as though yuh was jest puttin' a wagon train across the Hornather. We got critters that's got to be driven. We can't make no time."

"I know it," Skene said soberly. "It'll punish us. Our tongues will be hanging out before we see the Arkansas. But we'll get through. I won't be stopped."

CHAPTER 20

SKENE was no stranger to the Cimarron Desert—the old Jornada of the Spaniards—but he had never challenged its sandy wastes and blistering heat under comparable circumstances. For three hundred years, ever since the days of Coronado and Valverde, it had been the graveyard of white men. Skene himself had once been forced to drink the hot blood of one of his slaughtered mules to keep life together in his parched body. But as the sand blew, scouring faces raw, he could smile at the thought that they were bound north to help build the railroad that would forever remove the desert's threat.

Old Ben Lusk had not overestimated the difficulties that awaited them, and the suffering of the men and mules was acute when they slaked their thirst in the tepid waters of the Arkansas three days later. Weary as they were, they had to go on. Their food was exhausted.

"It's Grande Saline er bust, I reckon," old Ben cackled.

Just before sunset the next evening the men raised a shout at sight of

the town. "We made her, Gid!" big Wash yelled. "Pack a little grub into us and we'll be as chipper as a bunch o' yearlin's!"

Bent rode out to meet them, a broad grin on his tanned face. The spring rains were over, and the Kansas prairies were beginning to bake. "Man, we'll make the sand fly now!" He beamed as he pumped Gideon's hand. "These mules will be worth their weight in gold to me. And these men! They look like fighters!"

"They'll do." Skene smiled.

Camp was made outside of Grande Saline for the night.

"You're coming in to town with me, Gid," Bent said. "I'll arrange to have the men and the teams put on the railroad pay roll in the morning. My camp is still thirty miles east of here. I've got a big crew working night and day on the new bridge at Little Sandy. Clanton won't wreck this one. Chalk Ollinger and his bunch are over there with orders to shoot anyone they catch tampering with it. I intend to keep 'em there. Clanton left me an awful mess in the sand hills. But I'm getting it cleaned up. When your outfit gets on the job we'll come tearing into Grande Saline in a hurry."

He sounded as confident of success as ever.

"Mr. Marr believes you're pretty well licked," Gideon said. "I see you still figure you can't lose."

"How can I?" Bent demanded. "With your help I ought to be here in two weeks. That'll leave me better than sixty days to put down a hundred and five miles of track. If I can't do that I'll eat it! I was averaging better than that last fall. I ain't saying it won't be a fight; Clanton's getting desperate. But I've gradually got together a gang of men who can crack heads and throw down a shovel and grab a gun too."

Skene found Grande Saline changed. The lawless crowd—male and female—that had made Powell a hellhole had moved in ahead of the railroad. There was every reason to believe it would be the boom town of western Kansas. The panderers and human tickbirds knew it, and they were here to ply their unholy trades. Matt Brannigan and his thugs had moved in with them and boldly paraded the street.

The old Palace Hotel was crowded. Bent was full of questions as they ate. Skene was aware of the direction they were taking, and he had his answer ready when the other said, "What swung you over to my side, Gid?"

"I didn't like the deal you were getting. I've always had a weakness for the underdog."

"Yeh?" Steve grinned skeptically. "I guess there was more to it than that. The Marrs have always been your Bible." His face turned sober, and he was no longer looking at Gideon. "I know it was foolish, but when I got your letter I couldn't help wondering if she had had anything to do with your decision." He shook his head unhappily. "You must be as unpopular in La Paz as I am."

A young man, a stranger to Gideon, stepped into the dining room looking for Bent. The latter called him over to the table. He had to inquire the man's name before he could introduce him.

"Backus here claims that he and his brother have invented a thing they call a steam shovel," Steve explained. "He says it will go through these sand hills like a knife through butter, taking a yard at a bite."

"It will, Mr. Bent," the young man said confidently. "The Michigan Southern is using them. The Lake Shore Railroad has bought four of our Little Giants. We can send trained men along to operate them for you."

"How long will it take you to get two of them here from Ohio?" Bent asked. "If I'm going to have them I want them now."

"I can have them in Kansas City four days after they leave Toledo."

"All right, get them started," Steve told him. "I'll give you an order on the road that Mr. Tull will okay in Kansas City." The possibilities of the steam shovels fired his imagination, and when the young man had left Steve began to figure with his pencil on the tablecloth. "If they'll do what he claims we'll be able to move almost a thousand cubic yards of sand a day. Your mules will sure get a workout! We'll keep the dump wagons moving in a chain!" He sat up and grinned at Skene. "You've got to have a name, Gid. Suppose we call you Assistant Superintendent of Construction."

"I'm afraid I'd get lost in that mess of words," Gideon objected.

As they sat there talking Steve saw him stiffen suddenly. He surmised the reason even before he looked up to confirm it. Rita Molyneaux, her ultrafashionable clothes striking an incongruous note in this rough setting, was passing through the office.

"I see she's still here," Skene commented. The tone of it carried a demand for an explanation. Steve was quick to supply it.

"She's strictly on her own, Gid. You get that straight. She's playing her own game and she's managed to make me plenty of trouble. I know Clanton could say the same. She's dished it out to both of us. It took me some time to get wise to what she was doing."

Gideon gave him a glance. "What do you mean?"

"Why, she thought she could drive a wedge between Tull and me. You know the old man. He'd get a mysterious communication telling him something was wrong out here, or was going to be, and burn up the wire about it for a day or two or even come popping up on the job. I've got things tough enough without having Tull on my neck. With Clanton she's done about the same thing. It wasn't any trick for her to get stories going the rounds in St. Louis that I had Champ on the run. It brought Sansome out here two or three times. You know where old Eli fits in. I guess."

Skene nodded. "I'd stand just so much of that. I don't want to tell you your business, but I know what I'd do."

As he expected, he found the new work strange, but it did not take him long to discover it called for the same brand of determination and common sense that had made him a successful freighter. Before the week was over he found himself saddled with unexpected responsibilities. Bent's mules were overworked and badly galled. He took them off the job and put Wash Clemmons in charge of all livestock. "You can't get anything out of a sick mule," he told the men who handled the wheel scrapers. "Watch your

harness and don't overload."

Lapham, Bent's chief engineer, complimented him a day or two later. "The work is going better, Skene. The men have got a lift out of you. They were a pretty dissatisfied lot until you showed up. There's some Clanton agitators among them, of course."

"I wish I could spot them," Skene said. "They wouldn't be here long. Another thing that ought to be done is to scout these hills day and night. You can't depend on these militiamen to do it. I'm getting my own men organized, and when Bent shows up I'm going to put it up to him."

"He ought to be able to put a train over the new bridge tomorrow," Lapham said. "I imagine he'll be here by noon. He knows we need steel. I can use the men he's got too."

Gideon and Lapham were in the mess tent the following day eating dinner when they heard an engine whistle. A few minutes later a construction train—the first in weeks—hove into view. Bent swung down from the locomotive as it continued on past the camp to the railhead. "There's your rails, Bill!" he said to Lapham. "I'll keep 'em coming now." He turned to Skene then. "How do things go here, Gid?"

"All right, I guess."

"They're better than all right, Steve," Lapham declared. "Skene's too modest. He's doing a fine job. If your steam shovels amount to anything and they ever get here, we'll start to move."

Bent pulled out a sheet of yellow tissue and handed it to him. "Read that," he said. "The shovels left Kansas City last night. We'll have them tomorrow."

Before they left the table Skene outlined his plans for patrolling the sand hills. "Sure!" Steve told him. "I'm for it a hundred per cent. We don't want to have to do this work twice, Gid."

Skene selected twenty men from those who had come up from the Territory with him—cowboys and old Ben Lusk. It was work for which they were fitted. "If you encounter any man or group of men drifting through these hills turn them back," he told them, "and don't take any excuse. Any man who has legitimate business in these hills will understand and not give us any trouble. They'll know that the militia is here; that the Governor of Kansas has recognized the emergency that exists. As for the others, if you have to shoot, shoot to kill."

The two steam shovels, mounted on railway trucks, arrived during the night. When they were unloaded from the flatcars, they chugged to the end of steel under their own power. Ed Backus had arrived with them to superintend their operation. Watching the big steel dippers bite into the sand, Bent told himself he was witnessing a miracle. As the way was cleared ahead of the shovels track was laid for them to travel on, and their steady, clanking advance was like a symphony to Steve.

Gideon thought it was a conservative estimate after seeing the shovels cut away the whole side of a hill in the course of an hour. He had the dump wagons moving up to load in an unbroken line. When they knocked off

work for the day Lapham told him they had done better than four miles. That evening, in the car which Bent shared with him, he announced the exact figures: four and two tenths miles.

"With a late start and bucking as tough a job as we have had to face," Steve told them. "We'll be in Grande Saline by Saturday."

Young Backus was as pleased as he. "If you'll lay a little temporary track so one of the shovels can be moved ahead, they can work toward each other," he said. "That's what we did on the Michigan Southern. It will gain a mile or more per day."

"We'll do it, Bill," Steve told Lapham. "After tomorrow the country will open up a little for you."

A deputation of leading citizens from Grande Saline called on Bent to arrange appropriate ceremonies for the entrance of the first train. Skene expected Steve to make the most of the occasion, as he had done in Gallatin and Powell and had planned to do at Lower Crossing. To his surprise Bent said, "The ceremonies will have to wait, gentlemen. I have a date at the line with the state of Kansas on the fourth of June. That'll have to come first."

"It's the meanest camp we've made," Bent told Gideon. "But we won't be here long. A week, I'd say."

"It's too near town to do the men any good," Skene observed. "I'll be glad when we've left Grande Saline behind."

Bent laughed. "Better ease up a bit, Gid. I don't know whether it's because you've got your men riding or not, but things have been going swell."

"And I can't figure why," Gideon said flatly. "You don't think Clanton has given up, do you?"

"No. I understand he's left town."

"I wouldn't call that a good sign. If my slant on him is right, he'll be sure to risk everything on one move before he's through. In the meantime he's got Brannigan and a fine assortment of thugs to carry on for him. Ben and the boys have turned back any number of them."

At ten o'clock on Saturday morning the big shovels nosed through town with the entire population out to see. Two hours later the first train rolled through. By nightfall steel had been laid two miles west of Grande Saline.

"That's a day's work," Steve grinned. "We'll go into town for the night and put on the best dinner the hotel can dish up."

Before they had finished eating the men began to drift in from the camp. Skene saw them passing the hotel in twos and threes and in groups of twenty or more. They arrived with money in their pants and a chip on their shoulder. They had things their own way for a time, but by midnight they were too drunk to defend themselves. They were slugged and knifed. Once down they were rolled and robbed. Bent was forced to admit that as wild and lawless as Powell had been it had never seen a Saturday night to compare with this. "We'll have half a hundred men in the hospital tent on Monday, and a good many others will be in no shape to work."

"I've told you what I'd do about it," Gideon said. "But if it ain't any worse than you think, we can stand it. . . . Let's turn in. I've been on the go since six this morning."

They went upstairs together, and Skene continued on to his room. He was undressing when Bent walked in, a flask in his hand. "I forgot that I had this in the bag I left here," he said. "It's good stuff. Just enough for a nightcap."

He poured a drink for Skene and sat down on the bed. His manner turned moody. Out of a long silence he said, "Listen, Gid! Maybe I shouldn't say this, but I cant keep it in forever. You dont think Lavinias in love with Daniels, do you?"

"No," Gideon answered cautiously.

"Neither do I. I've only met him once or twice. He's a nice kid, but he ain't for her. She wants a man who can do things."

"Someone like you, eh?" Skene queried with one of his infrequent smiles.

"Yes—if you want to put it that way," Steve said, not a bit abashed. "But she's stubborn like her old man; she'll go through with this marriage just to spite me. I wrote her several weeks ago. The letter was returned yesterday unopened." He scowled at the floor. "I ought to be able to do something about it before it's too late."

"I don't know what," Gideon told him. "I wish I did—as much for her sake as yours. The best advice I can give you is to try to forget her."

"That's swell advice!" Bent growled. "When things are going tough for me I can get her out of my mind, but when a breathing spell comes along like this she seems to haunt me."

They talked a few minutes more before he got up to leave. As he was saying good night someone banged on the door. They swung around as it opened, and old Ben limped in. He was dragging his right leg. Gideon could hear the blood sucking up and down in the old man's boot. "What is it, Ben?" he asked with quick anxiety.

"I'm glad yo're both here," the old man growled. "They shore blew one of yore steam shovels wide open, Bent. Stuck a stick of dynamite in the firebox and let her go."

"How long ago did this happen?" Steve demanded fiercely.

"'Bout as long ago as it took me to git into town," Ben answered. "There was six, seven of 'em. They scattered like quail when I showed up. I busted one, I'm tellin' yuh! They had hosses. I chased a pair of 'em right into Grande Saline."

Bent made a quick decision. "I'm going out there, Gid. You get a doctor for this man. When you got him fixed up you'd better come out too."

When Gideon arrived at the railhead he found Bent pacing up and down, cursing like a madman.

"Nothing but a piece of junk!" Steve roared. "They'd have got both of them but for your men!"

"This brings us to a showdown," Skene said grimly. "Tomorrow is Sunday. We'll make it a Sunday that Grande Saline will remember. You back

a string of empties into town and have your engine headed east. We're going in with all the men we've got and round up every harpy and thug in the place. We'll start them east under guard, and we won't dump them this side of Pawnee. It's a clean sweep this time, Steve—Brannigan and all of them! I know some will drift back, but we'll be free of the most of them. It's a step you should have taken in Powell."

"By god, we'll do it!" Bent burst out. "I suppose the company will be smothered with lawsuits, but I've had a bellyful of this. The man that Lusk dropped is lying over there. He was one of Brannigan's crowd. I'll have the train ready and I'll be right in there swinging with you. The militia will be out at the camp. Before they can interfere we'll have that bunch of skunks on the cars and headed out of the country."

Skene built a fire to attract the attention of his men. Two of them appeared a few minutes later. He sent them off for reinforcements. When they returned he stationed them at the railhead for the rest of the night, and he and Bent pumped a handcar back to the camp east of town.

It was not yet eight o'clock the following morning when they arrived in Grande Saline at the head of threescore of their best men. Before the train on which they arrived had come to a stop they leaped off and started up the street, every one of them armed with club or gun. Within a few minutes they had cut off every avenue of escape. As the circle narrowed Grande Saline's Sunday-morning calm was rudely shattered. "Ten minutes to dress and gather your belongings" was the order.

News of what was happening ran over the town like an evil wind. An enraged roar went up from those who were to be banished. Women screamed and cursed as they were turned out. Men who tried to resist were quickly subdued. No vigilance committee could have done its work more thoroughly.

Skene pulled Matt Brannigan out of the attic of a dive a few doors from the hotel and herded him into the street with the others. Matt's protests that he had his rights—that this was a free country—fell on deaf ears. Before long over a hundred undesirables had been lined up.

"Have we got 'em all?" Bent yelled at Skene.

"We haven't missed many," Gideon answered. "Get them on the cars now and make it plain that the guards have orders to shoot any person who tries to drop off this side of Pawnee."

To the jeers and hoots of the watching crowd the outcasts were marched down to the railroad and put on the cars. Bent was about to signal the engineer to pull out, when he checked himself. "There's one more who's going, Gid. You wait here! It won't take me long."

Skene read his mind. "Bent, you're mad to think of it! You can't do this to her, no matter how much she deserves it! Have you lost your reason?"

His plea fell on deaf ears. Bent was already striding up the street in the direction of the Palace, a set look on his face. Elbowing men out of his way, he marched through the hotel lobby and up the stairs to Rita's room.

"Open up!" he bellowed. "You know who this is!"

"I'm not dressed," Rita answered, a sudden thrust of fear drying her throat. She had been up for an hour and witnessed what had taken place.

"Then get dressed! I'm giving you five minutes. You're going with the rest of 'em!"

"Steve, you wouldn't dare! Why, you beast, if you try to run me out of this town I'll sue you for every cent you've got!"

"Five minutes!" he repeated stonily. "You're going if it throws the road into bankruptcy!"

He heard her run to the door. Suspecting that it was unlocked, he tried it.

"Not dressed, eh?" he growled as he pushed in. "Put on your hat and gather up your stuff."

"I'll not move an inch! Don't you lay your hands on a thing in this room!"

Bent was not to be stopped. Ten minutes later Gideon saw Rita coming down the sidewalk, with Steve a step behind, carrying her bags, his face scratched and clothes awry.

At the cars Rita turned on him again, and he had to put her aboard forcibly. Her fellow passengers received her with hoots of derision and jeered at her finery.

A wave of pity swept Skene, and he turned away. But not Bent. He waved to the engineer to pull out and stood staring after the train until it disappeared. "I feel better already," he growled. "Let 'em sue and be damned to 'em! I only wish Champ Clanton had been here to see it!"

CHAPTER 21

THE EXODUS of the malefactors and riffraff cleared the air. Bent's first act was to have Backus wire for another shovel. The railhead was out of the hills now. One day seven miles of track were laid. That was close to the record the Central Pacific had set, and the stage had not been prepared for it as Charlie Crocker had done in Nevada. They were not able to equal it again, but with only one shovel working they began to average better than three miles every twenty-four hours. When they reached the region of broken bluffs and one small fill after another had to be made, the clanking Little Giant really came into its own.

The camp was moved again as Grande Saline was left behind. It was the last of the Kansas towns. For that reason alone it would have been important to the work. Wash Clemmons had Bent's mules in condition again.

"The outfit's in better shape than it has been any time since we left Pawnee," Steve said to Gideon. "The new shovel will be here in a day or two. We'll take it at a gallop then."

Without word of his coming Phineas Tull arrived in camp that evening along with the paymaster. The little man looked as harrassed as ever as he

stepped down from his car. He shook Gideon's hand and said he had been glad to hear that the other had joined forces with them. "But it's been a terrible ordeal, Mr. Skene," he wailed. "Clanton has cost us several hundred thousand dollars. I know he is behind all of these lawsuits that are being filed against us." He clucked his tongue tragically. "It's a bad business, sir! Where is Steve?"

Bent appeared on the platform of his own car in time to overhear that statement. "What's a bad business, Phineas?" he demanded with a grin.

"Running those people out of Grande Saline, Steve! The newspapers have taken it up. I forget the exact amount the suits total that have been filed already, but it's staggering, my boy."

"Newspapers talking it up, eh?" Bent asked, pulling down the corners of his mouth.

"Clanton seems to have the support of some of them——"

"To hell with Clanton!" Bent cursed. "He'll lose his interest in the Kansas Central and Pacific in a few weeks, I'm telling you! I'll be on the line by the first of June. Don't worry about your lawsuits. They won't amount to a thing."

From the time their association had begun Bent had always had the ability to steady the little man. It was no different now. The new shovel arrived the following day. Little Phineas stopped complaining at its cost when he saw it go to work, and he started back to Kansas City strangely relieved.

Tempers sharpened as the race for the line continued. Bent began to snarl at Skene and Lapham. Gideon stood it for a few days without saying anything. But tension was building up in him, too, and an explosion was inevitable. It came one evening as they returned to the hot, sun-baked car. Steve began to slam things around. Gideon whirled on him angrily. "That's baby stuff, Bent!" he snapped. "I'm sick of your ranting. And while we're about it, let me tell you not to make the mistake again of bawling me out in front of the men. Those wagons were being overloaded this afternoon. If you don't like the way I'm handling things, say so, and I'll get out!"

Steve started to answer in kind, but a flash of sense stayed him. "You're right," he admitted self-reproachingly. "I've acted like a damned fool. A good sock on the jaw is what I need. You know I'd be lost without you. If I open my trap again let me have it!"

He had had a shower rigged up in a corner of the car. They took turns under it. Lapham came in with the day's figures as they were dressing. "We did pretty well," he said. "Better than we'll do tomorrow. But we're all right; we've got twenty-nine working days left in which to do sixty-one and four tenths miles. We ought to be at the line with a week to spare."

"That's the way I want to play it, Bill," Steve said. "If something goes wrong at the last minute we'll still have time enough to get in the clear."

Lapham walked over to the mess tent with them.

"What's this?" Bent questioned as they sat down to the table. "Fresh tomatoes—and a cake!" He started to call Charlie Kurtz, his commissary

head, over to the table when Lapham said, "In case you've forgotten, Steve, it's your birthday. I asked Charlie to put on a little extra tonight. Mrs. Lapham sent the cake out from Kansas City. I managed to rustle a bottle of wine for the occasion the last time I was in Grande Saline."

"Birthday?" Steve grunted. "That's right!" Gideon had never seen him embarrassed before. "This is swell! You thank your missis for me, Bill. She shouldn't have bothered."

The next day Gideon wasn't sure of what he saw off to the southwest, but on the one that followed he was no longer in doubt. That faint blue haze on the horizon was the Superstition Mountains. It brought home to him more sharply than Lapham's figures the knowledge that they were nearing the territorial line. His thoughts winged ahead to La Paz—to Lavinia and Jephtha Marr. The pleasant days that had been suddenly seemed very far away, and he could not tell himself they would ever come again. Steve had had very little to say of his plans, beyond reaching the line, but Skene knew he would try to drive on. It meant another fight, bitter and—for Gideon—tragic in its possibilities.

Big Wash came looking for him during the afternoon. "Gid, Ki Smith jest rode in!" he exclaimed. "I sent him up to the fill, thinkin' yuh was there."

"Kiowa?" Skene ejaculated. "Is there something wrong in La Paz?"

"The little runt didn't say," Wash replied.

Gideon went off to the fill at once. Before he reached it he saw Kiowa and Bent heading in his direction. The bowlegged little man's grizzled face was as sober as Skene had ever seen it. Steve was equally grave.

"Here's news for you," the latter growled. "Wait till you hear what Ki has to say."

"Lavinia?" Skene demanded. He couldn't get the question out quickly enough.

"No," Kiowa muttered. "I'm here to make my stand with you. I jest couldn't stomach what I know is bein' cooked up fer you fellas."

"Let me get this straight," Gideon said. "Have you broken with Mr. Marr?"

The little man nodded grimly. "I couldn't tell him, Gid. I jest headed north. Clanton was in La Paz fer a week with him. Four, five days after he left, some of my Injun friends tipped me off to what was in the wind. Young Hueco and his renegades are bein' supplied with guns and money. They're goin' to raid you one of these nights. When I knew I had the facts I started to ride. I couldn't stand fer settin' Injuns agin white men."

"I told you, Steve," Skene said. "I knew Clanton would risk everything on one last toss of the dice."

"It's bad," Bent admitted, "but what can it amount to? I mean, what will it get Clanton and Marr?"

"Lissen, Bent," Kiowa spoke up, "these ain't reservation Injuns, though I reckon there'll be plenty of young bucks driftin' west to join up with Hueco. An' when they come at you you may find there's some white Injuns

ridin' with 'em. That's an old trick, but you jest remember it. It's serious, I tell you."

"You bet it is," Skene agreed. "We've got several hundred men on this job who never faced an Indian. If you were to repeat to them now what Ki has just told you most of them would ask for their time. They know that these farm boys dressed up in blue uniforms don't know any more about fighting Indians than they do. If we're raided once they'll figure it will happen a second time. My guess is that a little of that will tie us into knots."

"How are you going to keep them from knowing?" Steve asked. "You'll have to pull a number of men off the job and get ready to fight. The minute you do the whole crew will be suspicious."

"That'll be better than telling them the truth," Skene turned to Kiowa. "You haven't any idea when we can expect them?"

"No—ner where, but it won't be before the dark of the moon. It's the Kiowa way."

"That'll give us two or three days to get ready." Gideon's blue eyes were hard and thoughtful. "Ben Lusk is fit to ride again. I'll send him out on a long scout tonight."

"You better have Kiowa go with him," Bent said. "The two of you hike back to the car now and think this thing out. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Don't be long," Skene told him. "We've got to make a decision."

He was no sooner alone with Kiowa than the little man said, "There ain't no hard feelin' on account of that little run-in we had in the Arroyo Seco, is there, Gid?"

"None," Skene assured him. A frosty twinkle came into his eyes. "That was a slick trick you tried to hand me."

"Yeh, it shore would have been if you had fallen fer it. We laid out all night east of Spanish Flats, figgerin' you'd come along. We'd have made some trouble fer you if you had. But things like that is legitimate when you're makin' war. You was on one side and we was on the other. I reckoned you'd understand. But turnin' Injuns loose is sunthin' else. I tell you, Gid, I don't know what's got into Mr. Marr. He jest sits at his table night after night, starin' into space. I've seen him there at two in the mornin'. He's got busishess, I know—the ranch and the bank. It ain't the freightin' business that keeps him up. He's runnin' a few wagons back and forth between La Paz and Ragtown, but it don't amount to nothin'. Fact is, even Majors ain't freightin' much stuff up to the railroad. Reckon you noticed they ain't been many wagons passin' you. Everybody seems to be holdin' back—waitin' to see what happens."

Skene asked him about Lavinia.

"She keeps her chin up, Gid," the little man told him, "but you know what all this is doin' to her. I've seen her out ridin' with young Daniels. They used to do a lot of laughin'. They act mighty glum these days. I don't pretend to know nothin' about love, but if it ain't no more fun than that before you git hitched, what'll it be after?"

"Has a date been set for the wedding?"

"If so I ain't heard. Be sometime this summer, I reckon."

"So I imagine," Gideon muttered woodenly. "It was just about a year ago that Hueco staged his last raid. Too bad Daniels didn't snuff him out when he had him on the run. How big a force can he put together, Ki?"

"He can muster at least fifty young bucks. But, as I told Bent, you'll see white men ridin' with him. Clanton ain't goin' to depend on a bunch of Llano Injuns to bust things up fer you. If he's goin' to stop you he knows it's now or never. I'd bet my hair they'll come up by way of the Arroyo Seco and stay purty close to the trail till they're north of the Flats. It's a question what they'll do after that."

Skene sent a man off in search of old Ben with word for him to come to the car at once. "Ben saved our bacon at Grande Saline," he told Ki. "He may have something to suggest. We'll listen to him anyhow."

Lusk and Steve arrived together five minutes later. They discussed the situation at length.

"If it was me, I wouldn't sit yere and wait for 'em to show up," Ben declared. "I'd move out to meet 'em. Young Hueco has dodged the cavalry and got away with his raidin' becuz he's allus bin smart enough never to come off the cap rock with more'n a few men. If he's got the bunch ridin' with him that you fellas say, and got whites along to slow him up even more, he oughtn't to be hard to locate."

Steve saw that Skene approved. He shook his head, nevertheless. "You men have had the experience; I never fought Indians. But where will it leave me if you're sixty to seventy miles away and you happen to miss them? I've got equipment to protect. I can't do it with the men you'll leave me."

"There's that to consider," Gideon agreed. "I couldn't guarantee that we'd find Hueco. But this country hereabouts is as flat as a pancake; they can come at us from every direction. That low ridge up ahead would offer us some protection."

"We can make it during the morning," Bent declared. "We'll knock off work at noon and move the camp."

The men came into supper with tense faces. It was as though they knew what impended.

"You better call them together this evening and tell them we're expecting trouble and that camp is to be moved tomorrow," Skene said. "You needn't dwell too much on Indians. I would tell them to keep their guns handy. While you're doing that I'll get my men together. I'll put at least a dozen to guard the shovels."

"Tonight?" Steve queried. "Why, you ain't expecting that bunch just yet, are you?"

"Steve, there's whites mixed up in this. If they are giving the orders the usual Kiowa procedure won't mean a thing. I'm going out with Ki and Ben and ride a pretty wide circle before I get back. Until this business is over I'd keep steam up in one of the locomotives and see that it's handy. At the first sign of trouble tie the whistle down and wire Grande Saline for help. There's no reason why we should be satisfied with just beating off an

attack. If we hit hard enough we can put Clanton out of this fight for keeps."

"That's the slant to take!" Steve growled. "Instead of sitting here shivering in my boots, I ought to be tickled to death at a chance to wipe the slate clean. Give me a day or two and I'll have this camp organized!"

After posting a strong guard at the shovels Skene led the rest of his men south. At one time they were a full ten miles from camp. The night was as peaceful as any he had ever known on the prairies.

"This is far enough," he said as they pulled up. "You take half the boys, Ben, and swing off to the east and work back to the railroad. Ki and I will circle west with the others."

An hour and more after they parted they were walking their horses when Kiowa pulled up sharply. Skene saw him sniffing the air. "I smell dust," the little man declared suspiciously. "Better let me go ahead a few yards."

The fading moon was not much help to him as he studied the ground. He had not gone far, however, before he saw fresh horse droppings. "Gid!" he called guardedly. "Take a look at this!"

He was off his horse before he finished speaking. On hands and knees he examined the fresh pony tracks.

"A big party passed here mighty recent," Skene declared tensely. "What do you find, Ki?"

"Shod hosses! That ain't Injuns, Gid! What do you make of it?"

"They must have split up—whites coming this way and Hueco's bunch coming up over to the east. There ain't any other explanation. Climb into your saddle!" He turned to the men. "They're here! You'll have to look sharp now!"

As they rode forward, guns ready, Kiowa moved up beside Skene. "I feel ridiculous!" he called. "How do you figger they got up so quick?"

"Hueco ain't running things! I told Bent this was likely to happen! He'll know what's up in a few minutes!"

They were still a mile from the railhead when they caught the steady, faraway wailing of a locomotive. Almost immediately the sky to the north began to grow red. Guns began to talk. A few seconds later steady firing came from the direction of the steam shovels. They were nearer than the camp, so Skene headed that way. Presently he was close enough to see the gun flashes. Watching them a moment, he knew that the men he had posted were firing from behind the shovels. "Come on!" he yelled. "We're taking a hand in this!"

A tool shed was set afire. The leaping flames revealed a full score of men closing in on the defenders.

"Let 'em have it!" Skene ordered.

The attackers swung their mounts around and lost no time in answering the fire that was being leveled at them from the rear. Horses began to bolt; men dropped as the cross fire continued. Suddenly Clanton's forces began to flee toward the camp.

"Brannigan!" Kiowa screeched.

Gideon saw big Matt dashing up the roadbed. Ki snapped a shot at him, and Brannigan tumbled out of his saddle.

"There you are, Slick!" the little man screeched. "Took me a long time to git that skunk, but he's yores now!"

Skene reined up beside the shovels. "Anybody down over here?" he demanded.

"Andy Piper got it purty bad," Bud MacWhinney answered. "The rest don't amount to much."

"Well, come on then!" Skene cried. "The camp must be taking an awful liking!"

Kiowa had flung himself from his saddle and rolled Brannigan over on his back. Apparently satisfied that the man was dead, he was about to remount when Matt raised up on his elbow and flung a shot at him. Gideon turned just in time to see the little man stagger back. "Ki, you all right?" he cried.

"Shore!" was the doughty answer. "Figgered the skunk was dead. I—I——"

That was as far as he got; his little legs crumpled up under him, and he went down. Skene was at his side in a moment.

"Ki——"

"I tell you I'm all right," the little man protested, his face gray with pain. "I ain't bleedin' much. By Jasper, that slug is shore hurtin' though! But don't let them fellas git away. I'll be okay here till the scrap is over."

Gideon called to MacWhinney. "Bud, you stay with him!" he ordered, his tone rough with anxiety. "Soon as the fight's over get him to camp as quick as you can and have the doctor examine him!"

He rode off with the others then, his lean face rocky and grim. He thought it was the intention of Brannigan's men to join forces with the Indians. They veered off to the south, however. He wanted to run them down, but the steady drumming of guns from the direction of the camp swung him that way. Even at a distance of a mile he could see the flames shooting skyward as the raiders burned the tents. The gunfire seemed to have a definite ebb and flow. It was proof enough that Bent was still putting up some resistance. Skene was confident that Ben and his party had come up and were taking a hand.

"Injuns swarmin' all over the place!" a Capistrano cowboy cried a moment later. "Look at 'em! Let's start pickin' 'em off, Skene!"

"Wait!" Gideon cautioned. "We don't want to start firing into Ben and the boys! Where are they?"

"There's rifles crackin' every second or two over south of the tracks!" someone answered him. "That must be them! They ain't waistin' their lead! Lookit that red devil pitch offa his pony!"

They advanced another hundred yards before they went into action. The destruction of the camp threatened to be as complete as it had been at Powell. The commissary car was blazing. Farther up the siding the supply train was being consumed. Bent's car and the one the engineering

staff used had not yet felt the torch. Windows had been smashed. Through the jagged openings came a steady firing. Every few minutes the raiding Indians concentrated their attack on the two cars, only to be forced to swing wide to escape the leaden hail that old Ben and his crowd were flinging at them. There was shooting from the tie pile, too, where the militiamen and part of the construction gang had barricaded themselves.

Skene failed to locate the great majority of the men. He took it for granted that they had fled; that the raiders had let them go, expecting to overtake them and cut them down when they were through here. He caught a flash of young Hueco then. He pumped a shot at him, but it missed. A few seconds later not a Kiowa was to be seen.

"They're pullin' out!" someone yelled.

That was not the case. Hueco was only reforming his warriors for a concentrated attack on the two cars from the far side. It came quickly. Gideon could hear the slugs tearing into the flimsy wooden sides.

The maneuver had put his own force, and Ben's as well, at a temporary disadvantage. Gideon got to the old man in a hurry. "Come on, Ben!" he cried. "If we don't break that up there won't be a man left alive in those cars! You swing around in front! We'll take the rear! If we get them on the run, stay with 'em!"

There was a wild light in old Ben's eyes. According to his standards, the West had been tamed a long while back, and this was such a night as he had not expected to come upon again. With a shrill cry to his men he heeled his pony and dashed away, his long hair flying. A sharp command from Skene put the others in motion, so that the two forces struck at almost the same moment. Finding themselves attacked on both flanks was too much for Hueco. Before he could fall back a wild, exultant whoop, as ferocious as any Indian had ever uttered, pierced the air. Gideon knew Ben Lusk had voiced it. Proof of its meaning came immediately. The Kiowas turned and fled, and Skene knew it was only because they were now leaderless.

"Gof him square between the eyes!" old Ben yelled as he raced up. "They'll scatter on us now!"

The truth of this was apparent before the chase had continued half an hour. The raiders continued to split up and fade away until Gideon had to admit that he was chasing phantoms. The hunt continued until dawn, however.

"No point in going further," he told the men. "They paid dear for it. I miss my guess if this ain't the last Indian raid this country will see."

He told Ben what had happened to Kiowa and his fears for him.

"Shucks, that little runt is too tough to kill!" Ben declared.

"I wouldn't worry none. He's had the air let into him a dozen times."

"I only hope you're right," Gideon muttered, his lips clamped down in grim-visaged anxiety.

They had traveled so fast during the night that Skene believed they were well beyond Brannigan's adherents. He ordered a sharp lookout kept for them, and shortly after six o'clock they were seen. The men threw up their

hands and offered no resistance.

"We ought to cut their gizzards out and let it go at that," Ben ground out. "What yuh aimin' to do with 'em?"

"That'll be up to Bent. If he wants to ship them back to Grande Saline and prosecute them, all right. They won't get any help from Clanton. This was his last gasp."

By daylight the camp was a sorry sight. Counting Indians, a score of men had been killed. Of the camp itself, little remained. Even the hospital tent had been destroyed. Seeing that, Skene hastened to Bent's car. Steve came out on the platform. His face had been slashed by flying glass. "I've got him inside," he said, anticipating Gideon's question. "It's tough, Gid——" His voice seemed to stick in his throat and he could not go on.

"Well?" Skene demanded threateningly, as though he would tear the truth out of him.

"He's just been keeping himself alive until you got back. I wanted to put him on an engine and run him to Grande Saline. Doc said it wouldn't do any good."

His face gray, Gideon pushed him out of the way and hurried into the car. The doctor was with Ki. The little man smiled with his lusterless eyes as Skene bent over him. "I jest wanted to look at you again," he murmured, "and tell you everythin's all right with me. I was lined up with you at the end. That's the way I always wanted it, Gid."

"Are you in pain, Ki?" Skene asked, a tortured look in his blue eyes. His fingers closed over Kiowa's hand.

"No—jest awful drowsy. I—I want you to look out fer the little girl, Gid. She's awful unhappy."

"I know."

Gideon's thoughts were not here but back on the many trails they had traveled together, and their lives seemed to pass in review across his mind—compressed and yet somehow sharply detailed. And suddenly he was thinking of La Paz, of Jephtha Marr and the long years of fierce loyalty with which Kiowa had served the giant Jephtha. For a quarter of a century and more he had fought and bled for the man. It had forged a bond between them so strong that Skene had believed nothing could completely break it. And yet Ki lay here dying, struck down by Jephtha Marr's wrath.

It was incredible to Gideon. His blue eyes swelled with a quick, moving terror as he felt Kiowa's fingers relax their grip on his, and all the bitter agony that was in him fought its way through his constricted throat in a choking groan. Kiowa continued to smile, but it was a frozen smile, and Gideon knew he was dead.

"It was just like he went to sleep," Steve muttered, trying to hold his voice steady and not succeeding. "He was a grand little guy! I know what I owe him. I promise you he'll not be forgotten. I'll build a town here and name it after him, and he'll lie in the center of it."

Skene's eyes were wet. They were a strong man's tears, and he was not ashamed of them. "He high-tailed it over these prairies most of his life, but

they were never home to him, Steve. I'm going to take him back to La Paz. I—I know he'd like it that way."

CHAPTER 22 *

WIRES HAD BEEN CUT and poles destroyed in a number of places before the Indians made their presence known. As soon as Bent had had telegraphic communications restored news of the raid went winging back to Grande Saline and the east. In a long, detailed message to Tull he ordered new camp equipment rushed to him at once. The prisoners and the wounded were placed on a flatcar that had escaped the fire and preparations completed to remove them to Grande Saline. Bill Lapham and two of his assistants were among the latter. In fact, few had come off unscarred.

"I'm going in with them," Bent told Gideon. "I'll have to see about grub too; everything here has been destroyed. I'll bring an undertaker back with me to look after Ki and the rest of our men. I want them to have a decent burial. The sheriff can do as he pleases with the others."

Skene tried to pull himself together. "Some of the men who disappeared during the fight are straggling back. The rest of them ought to be rounded up."

"I know it," Steve agreed. "If you think you're up to it, Gid, I wish you'd do it. We've got to convince them that this won't happen again. They'll take it from you better than from me."

"I'll do what I can," Skene said. "This is going to cost you a week."

"All of that, with Lapham banged up and you going to La Paz. I don't mean you shouldn't go," Bent added quickly. "But it's going to be a close shave for me. I'll just about make it."

During the course of the morning Skene turned back the deserting laborers. In the distance he had caught a glimpse of the speeding westbound stage, and he knew that news of what had happened here was on its way to La Paz. Instead of doing nothing until Bent returned, he put the men to work salvaging what they could from the fire.

Charlie Kurtz, the commissary chief, managed to scrape up food enough for a noonday meal of sorts. Big Wash Clemmons appeared with a blood-stained rag tied around his head. A bullet had fanned his brow with its hot breath. Wash made light of his injury. "I bin lead-burnt before," he declared doggedly. "We lost a few wagons, Gid, but them red devils didn't run off nary a mule. I had some of them militia boys with me, and they shore stood their ground." He shook his head when he mentioned Kiowa. "Ain't no use my sayin' anythin'; yuh know how I feel. But I figger we got to put the road through on time now er Ki jest tossed his life away fer nothin'."

Skene gave him a sober nod. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but you're right, Wash. I'll try not to be away more than three days."

It was early evening before Bent returned. He had the sheriff with him,

and Bill Lapham, the latter on crutches.

"I stripped Grande Saline of everything I could get my hands on, Gid," Steve said, explaining why he had been gone so long. "The best I could do was to scrape up food enough to last us a day or two. I've got plenty coming from Pawnee. I had to get an undertaker from there too. The one in Grande Saline didn't have a coffin in his place. It'll hold you up until tomorrow."

"If it can't be helped I'll have to wait," Gideon told him. "In the meantime we can get things straightened out here. The work's got to go on, Steve. I'd move the camp tomorrow. The sooner you get the crew away from here the better it will be."

"I don't think there's any question about that," Bent agreed. "At least the sheriff will get through here this evening. The county isn't going to spend a cent. Indians and whites are to be buried out on the prairie."

Morning saw the work resumed. By noon the big shovels were slicing through the low ridge that Bent had expected to reach the previous day. He ordered the camp moved. There was so little of it left that moving it was no great undertaking, and it was accomplished without pulling all of the men off the job. Before the task was finished word came over the wire that the special from the east had just passed Grande Saline. It steamed into the new camp an hour before sunset. Skene ordered a wagon made ready as the undertaker went about his grim work. He walked over to the train where Bent was superintending the unloading then. "I'll be leaving directly," he said.

"I'll walk over to the car with you," Steve offered. "This is going to be a sad trip, Gid. . . . You don't anticipate any trouble in La Paz?"

"None that won't be of my own making," Skene said glumly. "I'll have some questions to ask that will have to be answered."

They were within a few feet of Bent's car when both stopped to stare at a rapidly driven buggy that had left the old trail and was heading in their direction. Skene recognized the yellow wheels at a glance. A hundred yards in back of the rig rumbled one of Jephtha Marr's familiar green Murphy wagons.

"It's Marr!" Steve got out tensely. "What's he doing here?"

Skene's face was stony. "I don't know" was his tight-lipped answer.

"Well, he wants to talk fast if he's got anything to say to me!" Bent growled. "I'll tell him off if it's the last thing I ever do!"

The big man saw them and drove over to where they stood. Without offering any greetings he got down from his buggy and walked up to them, his head up and his strong face a frozen mask. But something was gone from the man, something that Skene felt but could not define.

"I'm here to get Kiowa," Mr. Marr announced. "I advise you to hear me out, Bent, before you say anything, and you, too, Gideon. News of what happened here reached me in Ragtown. I have no intention of denying my responsibility for my part in it. I supplied Clanton with the money, but I never knew it was to be used this way. You are entitled to some

proof of that, and I'll give it to you: no man of mine was among the raiders. If it had been my will to turn Indians loose on you I could have sent several hundred Apaches along with Hueco."

"I'm surprised that you didn't," Bent whipped out accusingly. "Or maybe you didn't think that was necessary."

"You are a hotheaded fool, Bent," the giant Jephtha charged, and for a moment he was the towering, impregnable figure of old. "It is your great weakness. If you would only remind yourself that a man lies dead here who spent his life doing for me you would realize how grossly you misinterpret the facts, for it has never been said to me—even by my enemies—that I ever struck down a friend." The gray eyes shifted to Skene. "I am speaking to you as much as to this man. There is an old saying, and a true one, that you can't play with a kettle without getting your hands black. Mine must have been blacker than I knew or Kiowa would never have come away from La Paz believing that I had consented to this butchery. But you were close to me for a long time. Is it possible you found me guilty too?"

Gideon welcomed the question. "I couldn't believe this business had your approval," he said without favor, "but I recognized your responsibility and I can't find any excuse for it even now. I warned you in Grande Saline last winter that Clanton would take advantage of your support."

Jephtha Marr's answer was slow in coming. A gray, wintry look settled on his face. "I know you speak the truth," he said, driving himself now. "But I am not here to offer excuses. I fought you and your railroad, Bent, and I would have fought Clanton just as relentlessly. He's out of it now. I know you've won. It doesn't make me like the railroad any better. It's ruined my freighting business and turned even Skene against me. It will have its advantages for some, but the old ways will be gone, and they were my ways. If it hadn't been for what happened here I would have continued to fight you. I know I could have kept you this side of the Superstitions for three or four years, maybe forever."

"So you're really here to bargain with me. Is that it?" Bent said scurrilously.

The gray eyes closed down on him, forbidding in their cold depths. "I make no bargains with you, Bent! I had but one purpose in coming here. But this has been in my mind since morning, and I shall speak plainly. When I incorporated the New Mexico Shortline I was determined that no railroad should ever use the right of way. I am just as determined now that this slaughtering of men was done without my knowledge, and I'll give you proof that even you can understand! The New Mexico Shortline is yours at your own price. Have your attorneys get in touch with Judge McCandless; I'll see that he has the power to act for me."

Bent's surprise was complete. For the second time in his life he found himself at a loss for words. After an interval he said: "I've done you an injustice, Mr. Marr."

"I'm not interested in discussing the matter, sir," Jephtha said coldly. "Gideon, where will I find Kiowa?"

"He's in the car. I was ready to take him to La Paz. I was just waiting for the undertaker to finish."

"That won't be necessary. You are needed here." The undertaker appeared on the platform and told them they could come in. "No," Mr. Marr said, "I'll wait here. You take your leave of him, Gideon. When you are ready I would appreciate it if you asked some of the La Paz men here to bring him out and put him in my wagon."

Bent entered the car with Skene. After a few minutes the latter called Wash and old Ben and several others to the car. They carried little Ki to the waiting wagon. Wash spread a tarp over the coffin. Without any farewells Jephtha Marr climbed into his buggy, and as the wagon moved off across the prairie he followed it.

Bent started to speak several times but found what he was about to say so inadequate that he did not voice it. After supper he sat on the car steps with Gideon. "I'm beginning to understand what drew men like you and Kiowa to Marr. I've met all kinds, but never anyone like him. Win or lose, he never plays for small stakes. Like closing the cutoff. Do you realize he threw a hundred thousand dollars in my face tonight in offering me the Shortline at my own figure? That's some price to pay just to keep the respect of men."

The work began to go faster than ever as the days passed. Lapham, still hobbling around on his crutches, refused to spare himself even when it became apparent that the race had been won.

The railroad crossed the line on the twenty-ninth of May. There were no ceremonies. The goal had been reached, but coming after the big raid, it was a distinct anticlimax. That bitter fight had decided the issue. Even the men seemed to realize it. By the time the dead line arrived rails had been laid across the corner of No Man's Land and into Ragtown and the Territory. A trainload of political figures came out from Topeka, and the completion of the Kansas Central and Pacific to the line was made official. They remained only several hours. Little Phineas came bustling into Bent's car, where the latter sat talking to Gideon, soon after the special train had left for the east. He waved a telegram at Steve.

"They're all trying to get on the bandwagon now, my boy!" he cackled gleefully. "The very bankers that opposed us are now offering to buy our bonds. You wouldn't think Eli Sansome had ever heard of Champ Clanton!"

"Take my word for it, Clanton lost plenty of his own money fighting us," Bent observed. "He'll find something else to engage his talents, but he won't get over this in a hurry. Lapham says we can be in La Paz in sixty days. I think we can do better than that."

"But you have only the man's word, Steve."

"That man's word is good enough for me," Bent said so pointedly that little Mr. Tull swallowed his Adam's apple.

Bent turned to Skene the moment they were alone. "What were you leading up to when he came in?" he demanded bluntly.

"I was trying to tell you that I'm leaving you. You don't need me any

more. It's going to be easy sailing from now on.

"That's a swell kettle of fish!" Steve growled. "What's the idea? Have you got something better in mind? You know I can make room for you in the company."

"I don't question but it's a great opportunity, but it's not my dish, Steve. I'm going to stay here in the Territory and set up for myself. Two thirds of New Mexico will lie south of the railroad. Freight will move toward it. There'll be mail contracts and express too. I'm going to be ready to take a whirl at it. If the railroad brings in enough new people I may even establish some stage lines."

"It's a business you know; you ought to do well," Bent admitted grudgingly. "But why bother? I can do so much better for you. I figured this was just the beginning of things for us." He refused to take Gideon's no, and for an hour he argued with him. In the end he said, "I guess it's settled then. You're as stubborn as the Marrs."

Skene smiled. "I've got to be my own head man, Steve. If you want to buy some of my mules, all right. I know that most of the men who came up with me will be glad to stick with you. But speaking of the stubbornness of the Marrs, I think it's time for me to tell you the truth."

Bent gave him a long, measuring look. "What do you mean?"

"That you can thank Lavinia for whatever help you've got from me. She urged me to come. I wanted to throw in with you—I knew you'd changed; that you weren't the grafter you started out to be—but I never would have taken that step but for her."

Bent had leaped to his feet. His hot temper had its way with him. "I ought to cut your heart out for keeping this to yourself all these weeks!" he raged. "What were you trying to do to me?"

"It was her wish. . . . She didn't want you to know."

"Then why do you tell me now?"

"Because she's to be married in August, when Daniels gets his furlough."

"Yeh?" Bent snarled. "I'll have something to say about that!"

"Will you?" Skene said, not addressing him particularly. "I wonder."

CHAPTER 23

FROM THE DOORWAY of his newly opened office, Skene could feel the quickening pulse of La Paz. He had been back over a month. The talk was all of the railroad. With the Mexicans eager to earn the high wages Bent was offering, labor was no longer a problem, and the railhead had moved through Spanish Flats and Apache Wells without a pause. The big shovels were biting into the Superstitions now. The stories that drifted into town agreed that the rails would be over the crest in another week. Gideon knew that once that was accomplished Bent would be in La Paz in ten days. Already the Mexicans, as excited as children, were arriving with their families from distant ranches to be on hand for the ceremonies.

Skene had heard nothing from Steve directly since his return. He had been busy organizing his express business in the meantime. His first move had been to acquaint Jephtha Marr with his plans. It had gone a long way toward healing the breach between them. Seated at his table, the big man had made another of his momentous decisions. It was nothing less than that he was retiring from the freighting business, and when Gideon had left the darkened office at the conclusion of their lengthy talk the equipment and effects of the old business were in his name.

Throughout that interview and others that followed the giant Jephtha never referred to the railroad, except in speaking of Kiowa. Together they went to the graveyard, beyond the mission, and paid their respect to Ki. Skene could see the man aging. It was spiritual rather than physical. His vigor had always been in his will, and that unbending will had been forced to acknowledge defeat. Where another man, used to setbacks, would have thrown it off and gone on, he seemed to be left without a single prop on which to lean. A dark shadow lay in the gray eyes.

Skene saw enough to realize that in quite another way Lavinia was equally a prisoner of circumstance, the hurrying days bringing her hour of irrevocable decision ever closer. When she mentioned Steve she was guarded in what she had to say. Gideon didn't have to read between the lines to measure her unhappiness. He wondered if Spooky Daniels marked the change in her and what he thought about it.

The question recurred to him as the lieutenant rode by. They spoke, and Gideon turned back to his desk. A minute later Spooky was at the door. His young face wore a troubled look.

"If you are not too busy, Gid, I'd like to talk to you for a minute."

"Sure, come in!" Skene invited. "I haven't been seeing so much of you."

"No, I've been keeping to myself," Daniels muttered disconsolately. "Feeling the way I do, I don't want to see people. Has Lavinia said anything to you about breaking our engagement?"

Gideon's head came up sharply. "Why, no."

"You look surprised," Spooky said. "There's no reason why you should be. This whole business has been a mistake. Everyone knew it before I did. Let's be frank about it. I caught Lavinia on the rebound. We're good pals—at least we were—but she isn't in love with me. I told her three days ago that we better call it off."

Gideon shook his head soberly. "This is a surprise. What did she say?"

"She refused to hear of it. She seems to feel she has hurt me somehow. Hang it, I'm thinking of her, not of myself! You've got to speak to her, Gid. She'll listen to you."

"There's nothing I can do about it, Spooky, much as I'd like to," he said at last. "This is a matter you'll have to settle for yourself. You won't make it any easier by letting it drift along."

"I know it," Daniels declared tragically. "We're going to have an understanding before I go back to Logan tonight. At first I was actually fool enough to think she loved me." He shook his head sadly. "I don't suppose

you can understand how a man could be mistaken that way."

"I think I understand perfectly," was Gideon's sober reply. "It's not an uncommon mistake."

The irony of his words was lost on the lieutenant, as Gideon knew it would be. He sat there, deep in thought, for a long time after Daniels left. He knew what Steve's reaction would be if the engagement was broken. Long before now he had expected him to appear in La Paz. This would be news of a sort that would bring him quickly. Reckless, determined, believing there was nothing in his way any longer, there would be no doubt in Bent's mind but that he could sweep Lavinia off her feet.

Turning the bank corner the following afternoon on his way to his office, he saw Lavinia coming up the street. The sun was bright, and she was carrying a tiny ruffled parasol, the only one he had ever seen in La Paz. They met at his door.

"I'm glad I found you here, Gideon," she said. "I thought it was about time I inspected your new office." He watched her as she read the sign over the door. Beneath her smile her face was tense, and he suspected she was really there to tell him the engagement had been broken. "Skene & Co.!" she exclaimed. "That sounds very imposing."

"It doesn't mean very much yet," Gideon said with a little smile. "But I hope to make it stand for something in time."

He led her inside and offered her a chair.

"I've just left Father," she said after they had spoken a few minutes. "I suggested that we go to Santa Fe for a week or ten days until this railroad excitement is over. He wouldn't hear of it. He seems so depressed, Gideon, I wish you'd come to dinner tonight and see if you can't get his mind off his worries for a few minutes. The railroad is not going to be as bad as he thinks. He sold a piece of property this morning for three times as much as he ever expected to get for it. He has the bank, the store, and warehouses, to say nothing of the ranch. If values continue to rise he'll do very well."

"Both of us know it isn't money he needs," Skene told her, wondering why she said nothing about what he was certain was the real purpose of her visit. "I'll be glad to come, of course. I've just about decided to establish a stage line to Lincoln and Roswell. I'll be glad to have his advice."

When she was ready to leave he walked to the door with her. Not a word had been said about Daniels and the wedding. Skene didn't know what to think. It put a restraint on him that he carried to dinner that evening. He was glad he had the projected stage line to speak about.

"What's your reason for thinking it would pay?" Mr. Marr asked almost as soon as Gideon broached the subject. "Lincoln is a dead town. There's business in Roswell, but it never has come this way."

"The railroad will change that," Gideon said without considering the effect of his answer.

"Railroad!" the giant Jephtha spat the word out as though its taste was gall and wormwood on his tongue. "It will change a good many things.

If you're counting on the railroad to make the venture pay you'll have to use your own judgment."

He would say no more about it, and when Lavinia suggested to Gideon that the two of them walk in the garden, he consented readily, glad to escape the house.

"I only irritated him by my careless remark," he said as they strolled beneath the trees. "I should have kept any mention of the railroad out of my conversation."

Lavinia shook her head. "I'm afraid that's something none of us is going to be able to do. Shall we sit here? It's a beautiful night—so peaceful." Her tone was wistful. "Smoke your pipe—please! There's someone playing a guitar across the river. . . . Hear?"

It was a time and place for the exchanging of confidences, and Skene felt that if she had anything to say about her engagement it would be said here.

They had sat there some time when Skene noticed that the ground as their feet was getting wet. "The fountain's overflowing," he said. "I'll turn it down."

The pipe through which the water flowed was a few yards away. As he leaned over to turn the valve a man stepped out of the shrubbery. "Gid," he whispered, "it's Bent—Steve Bent!"

Despite their friendly relations of late, Skene faced him with conscious hostility. "You're going pretty far, busting in here. How did you get in? The mission gate is locked."

"I climbed over the wall. You don't sound very pleased about it."

"I'm not. In fact, I'm of a mind to throw you out. You haven't any right to force a clandestine meeting on Lavinia."

"Gid, I've got to see her!" Steve insisted. "It's now or never. You know that. Just give me three or four minutes."

Skene considered a moment. "All right," he decided, "I'll walk down to the river and back. Don't be any longer."

Thinking it was Gideon, Lavinia spoke without turning to him. "It must have been the fountain," she said. Bent grinned to himself and slipped his arm around her. Startled, she faced him, and her surprise left her gasping. "Stephen! Stephen Bent! What are you doing here?"

Bent held her off and gazed at her with enraptured eyes. "You knew I'd come, didn't you? I haven't been thinking of anything else." He tried to draw her close, but she struggled against him.

"Stephen, where is Gideon? Did you connive with him to get in?"

"No." Bent laughed. "He was as surprised as you when he saw me. He's walked down to the river. He promised to give me a few minutes alone with you." His strong arms drew her inexorably into their embrace, and his lips found hers. "I love you, Lavinia! You're the only thing in my life that counts. They're beginning to call me a success—say I pioneered a great railroad." He dismissed such praise with a disparaging shrug. "All that doesn't mean a thing to me. It couldn't—unless I have you!"

"Stephen——"

"No, you've got to listen to me," he insisted. There was fire in his voice. "I've got everything arranged. I went to Apache Wells this afternoon and got a license. I bribed the clerk to secrecy. Then I got a minister. He's out there waiting on my rig. We can go to Skene's house and be married tonight. He can be a witness—and old Josefa. It'll be our secret until the railroad comes in. I'll talk to Daniels and your father then."

"The presumptuousness of you!" she gasped. "Let me go! A license—a minister—and without so much as a by-your-leave! Have I ever given you any reason to hold me so cheaply? What right had you to be so sure of me?"

Her face was white where the filtering moonlight touched it, though for months—say what she would—she had lived for this moment.

"Of course I'm sure of you!" Bent cried, refusing to release her. "I know you love me! The last thing Gid told me when he was pulling out for La Paz was that he'd come to Kansas to help me because you wanted it that way. . . . Oh, I know he promised not to say anything. But he knew he owed the truth to you and me." Her silence checked him. He stared at her incredulously for a moment. "Why, you're serious about this! I—I don't understand. I wasn't trying to rush you into anything. I thought it was the best way. I knew I wouldn't get anywhere if I went to your father. Then there's Daniels——"

"Lieutenant Daniels has released me from my promise." Lavinia's voice was steady and dispassionate. Steve stared at her with fresh amazement. He saw something in her eyes that punctured his boundless self-assurance. He let her go and stood gazing at her with a puzzled, strangely humble look in his face.

"If you mean that, we can wait——"

Lavinia shook her head. "Stephen, I shall never marry you. It would only mean unhappiness for both of us. . . . I know you are a success. And it's only the beginning. You'll go on—do great things. It will be your life. There won't be room for anything else. You'd take me for granted just as you have tonight. . . . It would kill me."

"Lavinia, you don't mean that!" he burst out tensely. "You can't mean it! If you want me to eat humble pie I'll do it!" He caught her hands. "But that ain't it—it's something else! Look at me! . . . When I first raised my eyes to you I had a right to. There wasn't any other woman in my life. There hasn't been since then—not for a second! Do you believe me?"

"It's what I've always wanted to believe. But that isn't it," she protested. "I put all that out of my mind long ago and refused to let it matter. Your life was your own; you were free to do as you pleased." She had taken this defensive attitude against Rita from the first and had resolutely refused to question it. Now, suddenly, she knew she had been deceiving herself; that it was not her fear of Bent's ruthlessness, but Rita Molyneaux who stood between them. Though the truth shocked her, she still tried to deny it. "I wish you'd go, Stephen. This isn't easy for me. I should have

known long ago. You've never had any consideration for my feelings. But I wouldn't see it. . . . This is the end!"

Desperate, Bent smothered her in his arms despite her protests. "You don't know what you're saying!" he cried. "This is the beginning, not the end, for us!"

Hot, impassioned words poured out of him. The silence that greeted them was more convincing than anything she might have said. Fear swept him, and with eyes that were grim he let her slip away and stood there helpless for a moment.

"All right," he growled. "I guess you're right! I *was* too sure of you! I thought I'd changed." He laughed bitterly. "Showing up with a minister!" He shook his head at his folly. "I'm just a pirate and I always will be. You're well rid of me; I'd have broken your heart one way or another."

Skene's step sounded on the path. Steve turned to him savagely. "Get me out of here, Gid! I didn't have any business coming."

In the shadows Gideon's glance ran quickly to Lavinia and back to Bent. What he gathered left his face stony. "I'll give you a leg up over the wall," he muttered.

"Right!" Without a word to Lavinia, Bent started down the path. From the top of the wall he spoke to Skene. "I told you once that you were a sucker—that you gave up too easy. Maybe this will open your eyes. I don't mean a thing to her. Neither does Daniels. They've called off the wedding."

"You're a fool, Steve!"

"Sure! But they say you get wisdom out of the mouths of babes and fools."

He was gone then, and Skene was left there trying to shake off his bewilderment. He dismissed what Bent had said as just so much idle chatter. He felt that no matter what had happened it would not keep them apart for long.

When he returned to Lavinia he found tears in her eyes.

"You better tell me all about it," he said. "You'll feel better. This isn't the first time you've sent him away."

"It will be the last," she said, drawing herself up. "The idea of his coming here with a minister! Treating me as though I were some silly little peon girl who'd grasp at whatever he offered!"

Her indignation was real enough, but it did not fool Skene. "Seems to me you're condemning Steve for the very qualities you once admired in him," he observed soberly. "You approved when you saw him pushing people out of his way and overcoming every obstacle that was put in his path. That's part of him. I don't believe you would change him if you could." He shook his head. "I'm afraid there's another reason. You better face it and be done with it."

"Gideon, pleasé!" she entreated.

"I mean it, Lavinia. You can't wish away the past. The shadow of Rita Molyneaux lies between you and Steve. If you're going to carry that

thought through life you did the right thing in sending him away and saying you never want to see him again. I don't know why that should be so. My ways are not his, but it seems to me that all a woman can ask of any man is how he has conducted himself since he addressed his attentions to her. I never felt that I should be the one to tell this. But I shall. . . . Champ Clanton brought that woman out to Kansas as his paid agent. He thought she'd be able to trade on his old relationship with Steve. It wasn't her fault that she didn't succeed."

Once started, he didn't stop until he had told her the whole story. She was silent when he finished. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them. What she had learned filled her with a savage exultation and crushed her at the same time.

"Have I answered your question?" he asked.

She nodded. He could hear her crying softly. She turned to him then and buried her face on his shoulder.

"Oh, Gideon, what am I going to do? I've been so foolish."

"You're going to abide by your decision," he answered, and there was a faint shadow of annoyance in his voice. "After all, you are no silly little peon girl."

CHAPTER 24

WORKMEN appeared in La Paz two days later and began to erect the railroad station. This was an unusual procedure, and Skene was further impressed when he saw that the little building was to be of Spanish architecture. It was a nice gesture on Steve's part, he thought.

Before the men were finished the clanking shovels and the grading crew were down the side of the Superstitions and forging across the level plain. The track gang was not far behind. One morning a plume of black smoke was visible to the north; the snorting iron horse had surmounted the last barrier and was peering down at La Paz. It was still a distant view, but nothing stood in the way of its conquest now.

It gave Skene a wrench, fully prepared as he was for its coming. The Great Trail and the old days that Ki and he had known had long since faded, but somehow the knowledge that the first locomotive was through the mountains seemed to turn the page forever. He left for Roswell that noon to conclude arrangements for his stage line.

He had seen nothing of Lavinia or Bent since the night in the garden. Steve had not been in La Paz again. He wouldn't come, Gideon felt, until the bunting had been put up and the band was playing and a crowd was there to hail him. Lavinia's conduct was harder to predict, though he once would have wagered his life that her pride would keep her from humbling herself by going to Bent. Some doubt of what the future held for her and Steve had crept into his mind. He didn't doubt their love for each other, but both were strong-willed, and Steve was rash. Some act of his might

keep them apart for all time.

Gideon preferred not to see it that way. After a few months when the railroad was no longer uppermost in everyone's mind, he believed they would adjust their lives—as all would have to do—and find their happiness all the richer for the waiting.

He had been gone several days when two ornately decorated Concord Stages, each drawn by six-mule teams, rumbled into La Paz. It created a diversion that momentarily drew attention away from the railroad, now almost within whistle distance of the town. The gold paint and flying banners and richly caparisoned teams suggested that this was part of a traveling circus, such as were common enough east of the Mississippi. It missed being that by the narrowest of margins, as Sol Hyman, who had piloted Rita Molyneaux to fame, intended. Having once made a fortune out of Rita, Hyman believed that she could repeat her success in the gold camps of Nevada and California. He had found her in St. Louis soon after her fuming return from Kansas. She had been willing enough to listen to his plans to surround her with competent artists and make a gala tour to the Pacific coast. Denver had been their first stop. They were bound for Santa Fe now. Their itinerary called for only an hour's stop in La Paz.

The little town held an interest for Rita of which Sol Hyman was completely unaware. Disregarding her manager's warning that they would have only an hour there, she had a trunk taken up to her room and spent a painstaking forty minutes on her toilet. When black Jennie finished dressing her Rita ordered a carriage and had herself driven to the great house at the end of the street.

Old Tomas stepped out as she drove up to the door. He was visibly impressed by her elegance. She handed him her card.

"Tell Miss Marr I have a most urgent message," she said when the old servant had shown her in.

Lavinia witnessed this amazing spectacle from her vine-covered balcony. It filled her with an indignation such as she had never felt. By chance she had learned that Rita was in La Paz. With an eye to business, Hyman had had some handbills passed out, announcing the concert in Santa Fe. One of them had found its way into the house, and she had happened to see it.

Without so much as glancing at it, she tore the card Tomas handed her to bits.

"I'll not give that woman the satisfaction of thinking I'm afraid to face her," Lavinia burst out as she pulled the bell cord for Manuelita. "I'll dismiss her myself!"

When she descended the stairs twenty minutes later only the suspicious paleness of her cheeks gave any hint of her seething fury.

Tomas was waiting below, his brown face inscrutable. He proceeded her into the drawing room. "Miss Marr," he announced with flinty dignity.

"You wished to see me?" Lavinia inquired, her voice steady in its studied

indifference.

"Yes," Rita acknowledged, unconsciously paying her the compliment of finding her a more accomplished antagonist than she expected.

Old Tomas started to leave, but Lavinia stopped him. "Miss Molyneaux will only be staying a moment." She gave Rita a frigid, withering smile that the latter would have had difficulty in equaling. "I'm sure the message you say you have for me is not too personal for my servants to hear. . . . Go right ahead."

Rita's exasperation overcame her cunning at the way the situation had been turned against her. "It concerns Stephen Bent—and your father," she said tartly. "I knew you would be interested."

Lavinia did not lose her poise. "You'll find Mr. Bent at his camp several miles north of town. As for my father, you can ask for him at the bank."

Rita laughed cuttingly. "So that's how things stand with you and Steve, eh? I'm rather surprised."

The thrust failed to pierce Lavinia's armor. Without turning her head she said, "Tomas, will you show this woman to the door? Obviously she came here under a misapprehension." And with a curt nod, "I'll bid you good afternoon."

Rita rose, her dark eyes flashing angrily. "I assure you I am not here under any misapprehension, Miss Marr. You are welcome to Steve. We don't owe each other any favors, but I felt it was my duty to tell you that when I left St. Louis nine days ago Champ Clanton was openly threatening to come out here and shoot your father and Steve on sight. He's desperate enough to do it. He's been drinking for days—his money gone. Clanton is in his Territory. When we came through Apache Wells I saw him. . . . You can treat this information as you please."

Something touched Lavinia's face and whisked away her mask of indifference. Her fists clenched, and in her wrath she was as primitive as any Indian who trod the streets of La Paz. She had caught Rita in her lie and at once realized what prompted this alleged warning.

"You came through Apache Wells this morning?"

"This morning," Rita agreed.

"I just wanted to be sure." Lavinia's voice had a dangerous ring. "We do not have the railroad yet, but we are getting our news from the east by telegraph. Champ Clanton was arrested in Leavenworth yesterday for defrauding the stockholders of one of his promotions. So your tissue of lies doesn't accomplish anything for you. Your only idea in coming here was to frighten me with your story. . . . Now go! Get out of this house at once or I'll have you run out!"

"Why, you little hussy, don't you order a hand laid on me!" Rita cried shrilly. She could attempt no defense of her story. "I wish you luck with Steve Bent!" Tossing her head defiantly, she fled to the door. It opened as she approached, and Skene stood there, a frosty look in his eyes.

"Our good man Friday!" Rita burst out contemptuously as she tried to brush by. Skene barred the way with his arm.

"I saw you run out of Grande Saline, and I didn't like it. You've made me change my mind. If there's any further provocation I'll run you out of La Paz."

He let her go then, and Rita hurried to her carriage and drove off.

Gideon motioned for Tomas to leave him alone with Lavinia. "I only got back to town a few minutes ago," he told her. "When I learned that she was in La Paz I thought something like this might happen. . . . Why did you receive her?"

"Because I didn't propose to cower upstairs like some schoolgirl who was afraid to face her. . . . Sit down, Gideon. I'm so angry I'm speaking crossly even to you. The heartless cruelty of that woman coming here with such a tale! If Father had not just happened to say last evening that word had been received of Clanton's arrest in Kansas I would have been forced to believe her."

When she repeated what had happened Gideon could only agree with her as to the purpose of Rita's visit. "Obviously, if Clanton was arrested yesterday in Kansas, she couldn't have seen him this morning in Apache Wells. I imagine he has done some talking—back where it meant little to anyone."

"Then you agree with me it's nothing to cause us any alarm?"

"I think we can forget it," he said. "Clanton will be out on bail, I suppose, but he's too smart to set foot in the Territory. There's a hundred men here, old friends of Ki, who'd make short work of him. The railroad will be here before the week's out. I understand the ceremonies are to be held on Saturday. I managed to get my affairs straightened out in Roswell, but the talk down there is all about the first train in. Headly and Vic Thatcher and a number of them are coming up to see for themselves. It ought to be quite an occasion."

Lavinia said yes. "It will be a bitter one for Father."

"Yeh, I know," Gideon murmured. He raised his eyes to her abruptly. "Have you seen Steve?"

She shook her head.

"He's invited a number of people to ride in on the first train. I found a note from him at the office. He asked me to bring you."

"No, Gideon, I couldn't!" she said tensely. "If there were no other reason, I'd have to refuse on Father's account."

"I understand. I won't go myself. I'll let the politicians and stockholders have my seat." He was silent for a moment or two, and his face fell into sober lines. "It seems such a short while ago that the wagons were rolling all the way back to the Missouri." He smiled wistfully at some thought. "I don't know why it should come back to me so often, but I keep recalling the evening on the station platform in Pawnee when you came home from school. Bent was there. He told you he'd be in La Paz on business soon. I asked him if he meant railroad business, and he told me he had no other. . . . Well, he's here, and the wagons stand gathering rust in the yard."

CHAPTER 25

FROM HIS OFFICE DOOR Skene witnessed the departure of Rita Molyneaux and her little troupe from La Paz. To him it was like the passing of an evil wind, and once past, it could be quickly forgotten. "I doubt that we will see her again," he said to himself. He smiled at the thought of Lavinia standing up to her, giving better than Rita could send.

The following day saw the rails laid into town and past the new station. In all its brash newness the Kansas Central and Pacific was ready for its first train into La Paz. It brought Gideon only the slightest twinge of regret, for in his mind the railroad that he had dreaded, then fought, and finally helped to build, had been an accomplished fact for days.

Men of prominence in the Territory began to arrive in town. General Wallace, the territorial Governor, and other dignitaries came from Santa Fe. Along with the notables came a small army of lesser folk.

Early Saturday morning Gideon saw Mr. Marr making his way to his office, looking neither to right nor left. He thought he knew what was in the man's mind. The giant Jephtha's industry had built this town. Now, suddenly, it was a place foreign to him.

Later in the morning Skene tried to see him, but Jephtha had locked himself in his office and would admit no one.

The band from Fort Logan rode in as Gideon stood on the bank steps and took the position reserved for it in front of the flag-draped railroad station. The crowd began to gather, and small boys, no different here than elsewhere, sought points of vantage.

A few minutes before noon a train whistle sounded off to the north. Cries of "Here she comes!" mingled with "*Es el tren! De gran velocidad!*"

Gideon turned the corner of the station. Over the heads of the crowd he caught a glimpse of the three-car train, gay with its fluttering bunting and flags. In a few minutes it steamed into town. The band blared and the engineer greeted the cheer that went up with long and repeated blasts of his whistle.

A quarter of a mile beyond the station the train was turned around and slowly moved back to the scene of the festivities. Steve Bent and little Phineas Tull stood on the rear platform, bowing and waving. Behind them stood General Wallace and a group of notables. Steve raised his hand for silence.

This was the Stephen Bent that Skene had first seen on the station platform in Pawnee, immaculately clad, grinning, debonair. Beside him Tull and Bill Lapham, even the general in his brass buttons, seemed colorless and unimportant.

A burst of applause greeted General Wallace as he stepped up to Steve and shook the latter's hand. He began his remarks by reading a congratulatory telegram from President Hayes in Washington. For the benefit of the Mexicans it was repeated in Spanish.

The crowd listened intently as the general spoke. He was blunt and soldierly, as was to be expected. Steve replied at length and, to Skene's surprise, his tone was singularly modest. The railroad would continue on across the Territory, he promised. He made no extravagant claims for it.

"It's here to serve all of you," he said. "I couldn't let this occasion pass without paying tribute to those who have backed the road with their money and to my assistants and the men who have frozen and sweated for a year in building the road." He mentioned Lapham, Skene, and a dozen others.

Bent finished speaking, and Mr. Tull stepped forward to read some prepared remarks. He digressed repeatedly and was his usual repetitious self. Skene lost interest in what the little man was saying. His glance roved to the edge of the crowd, and he was startled at the sight of Lavinia seated in her carriage. Her face was pale and tense. A moment later he knew that Bent had seen her. He wondered if Steve realized what it cost her to be there.

The band struck up a lively air at the conclusion of Tull's remarks. The crowd was cheering again. Up ahead the engineer gave a warning toot of the whistle, and the train began to move away.

Skene's glance went back to Lavinia. He had seen Bent turn to her, a silent appeal in his eyes. The shadow seemed to lift from her face. Her lips parted, and Gideon expected her to give Steve a smile that would tell him he was forgiven. Then almost between breaths a look of stark terror widened her eyes.

"Stephen!" she cried in sheer horror.

Skene whipped around to see Champ Clanton fighting his way toward Bent, a wild look in his round little eyes. There was a pistol in his hand. Having dismissed Rita's false warning, he had not believed Clanton to be within seven hundred miles of La Paz. He didn't stop now to ask himself how the man came to be there. Bowling men and women out of his way, he made a rush for Champ as the latter closed the gap between himself and the moving train, but before he could fling himself at him Clanton whipped up his gun and fired.

Bent had caught Lavinia's warning. It was not until Clanton and Gideon burst through the crowd, however, that he understood its meaning. Sweeping little Phineas out of the way, he was about to leap from the platform and throw himself at Clanton, when the latter's gun crashed. The bullet pierced Steve's tall beaver and sent it flying. His feet touched the ground the next moment, and he swung around to face Champ just as Skene leaped forward and knocked Clanton to his knees.

In falling Champ had not lost his gun. With the rage of a madman he turned it on Skene. Before he could pull the trigger Bent was upon him. As they rolled over on the ground Clanton fired. The slug tore into Steve and twisted him around. Breaking away, Champ scrambled to his feet, his pistol spurting flame and death at Gideon. The latter's shot dropped Clanton in his tracks.

It had happened so quickly the crowd stood stunned for a moment. "Get

the doctor!" Gideon rasped, dropping to his knees beside Bent. "He's badly hurt!"

The train had been stopped. Tull and the others came running back. Tuss MacWhinney was ahead of them. "Yuh better put him in my rig, and we'll get him up to Melgares' place. . . . I'll give yuh a hand!"

Before they could move Bent, Lavinia rushed up to them. "This is terrible!" she gasped. "He—he isn't dead?"

"No," Tuss answered her. "He's breathin'. That skunk over there is a goner though."

Lavinia took Steve's head in her lap. Her tears were blinding her. "I want him taken to our house," she told them. "See that someone tells Dr. Melgares to go there at once. . . . You place him in my carriage, Gideon."

They had Bent at the big house a few minutes later. Old Tomas came hurrying out, his eyes wide.

"Quick, Tomas!" Lavinia ordered. "Call Manuelita! Take him to my bedroom, Gideon."

White-haired Dr. Melgares arrived quickly. "Head wound," he announced after a hurried examination. "They're always dangerous." He ordered everyone out of the room save old Manuelita.

Lavinia paced the hall, and Skene could not comfort her. "It was a warning after all," she said bitterly. "I shouldn't have disregarded it."

"That's nonsense," Gideon insisted. "You have no reason to blame yourself. That woman believed she was lying to you. Melgares will pull Steve through this." He shook his head heavily. "Steve saved my life. I should have killed Clanton on sight."

Lavinia continued her pacing. She stopped suddenly, "Gideon, Father must be told."

"You're right," he agreed. "I'll fetch him."

"Wait!" she cried as the doctor stepped out of her bedroom. "Here is Dr. Melgares." She ran up to him. "How serious is it, Doctor?" she asked in her anguish.

"He's still unconscious, my child. Frankly, I'm afraid to remove the bullet. I haven't the skill for such a delicate operation. If he doesn't regain consciousness in a few hours we may be certain that the missile has lodged against the brain. . . . I can only suggest that we wait and hope for the best."

"That's not very satisfactory," Skene growled.

"Please, Gideon," Lavinia cautioned. "Get Father here."

Gideon left the house and hurried down the street. Repeated banging on Jephtha's door brought no response.

"Mr. Marr, this is Skene! Bent's been shot! Lavinia wants you at the house!"

The door was opened immediately. The giant Jephtha was a brooding, pitiful figure as he stood there.

"Who shot him?" he demanded fiercely.

"Clanton. I don't know where he showed up from, but he tried to get

me too. Bent stopped him." He repeated the details.

"That man and his railroad!" Jephtha burst out with savage fury. "Kiowa—and now this!" Hatless, he struck off for the house, and Skene had to lengthen his step to keep up with him.

"Where is Melgares?" the big man demanded as he climbed the stairs to the sickroom.

"Here, Mr. Marr," the doctor answered. "There is nothing we can do but wait."

"Wait! I refuse to wait! You're a doctor. I expect you to do something beside wag your head and tell me to wait! Get in there and see how he is!" Melgares returned to the sickroom to appease him. For the first time Jephtha Marr glowered to himself, and Skene knew he was questioning Bent's right to be in this house.

When Dr. Melgares finally emerged he was shaking his head.

"I am convinced that an operation must be performed," the doctor said carefully. "It requires a brain specialist. There is not a man this side of Kansas City capable of it. Thank God we have a railroad and can get him there quickly! The train should go through without stopping. We should go at once."

The giant Jephtha's head came up, but Skene pounced at him before he could speak.

"I know what your objections will be, Mr. Marr! But if you are unwilling to let the railroad serve its purpose I'll take Bent out of here and see that Lavinia goes to Kansas City with us if I have to fight you to do it!"

"Father, you can't refuse!" Lavinia cried. "It means Stephen's life."

Jephtha Marr stood there for a moment, a tortured look on his broad face. "I shall raise no objection," he said heavily. "If the railroad has any purpose, it is this. I have fought it, and the Almighty seems to be calling me to account for my blind hatred. If Bent's life is spared I swear I shall not oppose him any further. . . . I know you love the man."

If it was not complete surrender, it was at least a partial capitulation.

"You get Steve to the station as quickly as you can," Skene told them. "I'll see Mr. Tull and have the train ready."

He left the house on the run. By the time they arrived with Steve, Phineas had the train ready to pull out. He had not bothered to rip off the bunting and flags in which it had arrived in ceremonial triumph that morning. The wind in the Superstitions saw to that.

"I've got everything wide open for us," the little man told Lavinia. "We'll change engines in Pawnee. I intend to be there by midnight. That means doing better than thirty-five miles an hour, but we'll make it or know why! This boy means as much to me as my own son."

Lavinia nodded, refusing to take her eyes away from Bent. She had called herself blind and foolish. She had only to gaze at his pale still face to realize it afresh.

"O God, don't take him away from me!" she prayed. "Don't punish me for my foolishness!"

Manuelita and Gideon finally prevailed on her to take a seat in the rear of the car and rest. Lavinia sat down beside her father. His face was a stern mask. Despite the lurching and swaying of the train, he sat up stiffly, unwilling to find anything of comfort in this iron road.

With the mountains left behind, the train soon thundered through Apache Wells and Spanish Flats. Ragtown flashed by. It was all familiar country to the big man. . . . Grande Saline, Lower Crossing, Powell—here his wagons had rolled when the country was just open prairie, Indian country, without town or ranch house. Now the towns were here, and dirt farmers were beginning to turn the sod under. His wagons and Skene's fast-traveling mule teams had been days in making this journey that was now a matter of hours. "Get in step! Get in step!" the clicking rail joints seemed to drone. The giant Jephtha nodded to himself. He knew that was the lesson he had to learn. It was the tomorrows, not the yesterdays, that he had to reckon with.

The afternoon faded. That evening Skene came into the car after a long absence. His clothes and face were grimy. "I've been up helping to fire the locomotive," he explained. "Any change?"

"None," Lavinia told him. "We must be about eighty miles out of Pawnee."

"Just about."

"I can't believe I'm going to lose him, Gideon," she said as they sat down together. He took her hand in his gently. "I couldn't go on if I did!"

"I know you couldn't," he muttered. "You don't have to tell me. Tull's wired ahead to the hospital to have everything ready. We'll have the best surgeon in Kansas City."

The delicate operation was performed the following day and with gratifying results. Toward evening they were permitted to see Bent for a moment.

"It's like a miracle, Stephen," Lavinia murmured, pressing her cheek against his.

Steve smiled wanly. "The miracle was that you were able to get me here in time. You couldn't have done it in the old days, Mr. Marr."

Jephtha nodded. "That's true," he said, his heavy voice breaking. "I'm sorry I had to be convinced this way. It—it's been a lesson to me. But you get well, Bent."

"Don't take too long about it," Skene echoed. "A marriage license is only good for thirty days under territorial law." He caught Mr. Marr's eye. "I think we'd better leave them alone for a moment," he said, his smile hiding the ache in his heart. "I—I imagine they may have something to say to each other that's not for our ears."

He took the big man's arm and walked out of the room with him. Bent shook his head.

"I never would have believed it possible," he said. "Lavinia, let me look at you. Was Gid right? Have I a chance with you?"

"Do you need to ask?" she whispered. "You see, Stephen, we Marrs are

apt to be stubborn and blind for a time, but when we know what we want, we usually get it." She bent down suddenly and crushed her lips against his.

"I must be dreaming," Steve murmured. "This can't have happened to me." The nurse appeared in the doorway, but he refused to let Lavinia go for a moment. "Your father often used to say that the railroad would change everything." He smiled. "I'm glad I believed him."

THE END

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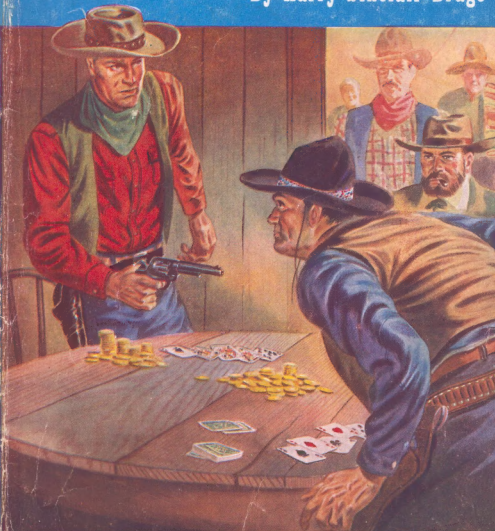
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